

Feast of the Holy Family, 2018

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Today's festal celebration of the Holy Family is (like Christ the King) another modern development - this one designed by the Roman Catholic church to counter some of the social tendencies thought to be weakening the family unit. Devotion to the family of the human Jesus emerged as a cult in the 1600s and we begin to see depictions in art of Jesus with Mary and Joseph around that time – though of course the nativity had much earlier inspired artists. But it only became a Feast in the early 20th century (1921). As some of you may remember, Fr. Peter is fond of saying that only a church led by celibates could have placed such a feast on the Sunday after Christmas!

It is only too true that Christmas as we now know it as a public holiday and festive season can cause particular stress for many people, not least because the media relentlessly refer to it as family time. There are those who have no families, and those whose familial experiences and memories are sad or destructive. There are those for whom difficulty in having children is particularly acute as the church and our wider society contemplate the baby Jesus in the stable. And for those whose families gather together there can be strains so strong that they can almost if not actually explode, ripping up social conventions of good will and civility. *The Times* on Saturday 15th December this year was graphic in exploring family stress, as a psychotherapist and family expert gave advice on how to keep the peace at Christmas. Among his categories of potential disruption were the following:

My mother-in-law is relentlessly critical – even about the children

My sister-in-law is cold, touchy and difficult

My in-laws are so extravagant with gifts, it makes me uncomfortable

My father-in-law loves to share his offensive opinions

I feel judged by our young, teetotal son-in-law

And even - *They are religious, we're not*

I am sure many of could add to this list.

Portrayals of the Holy Family in various artistic forms are relentlessly sanitised and even saccharine. There is normally a peaceful young woman with a clean and tidy baby in her arms – no thought of the anxiety Mary must have felt being away from women kin at such a critical time; no sign of the exhaustion which follows giving birth; no sign that Joseph was anxious about the lack of a decent room in an inn for his young wife and new-born son. The stable is immaculate, which stables generally are not.

However if we turn to the birth and infancy narratives which Matthew and Luke give us in their gospels, the story is rather different. And it connects with our own messy experiences of even the closest human relationships, and with many of the tragedies of our own world. We have of course a baby conceived outside marriage; a young expectant mother dragged on a long and deeply uncomfortable journey probably on foot, or on the back of a donkey if she was lucky, because of the pressures of an imperial state. We see a homeless couple with not even a temporary lodging place of their own, bereft of the support of family and friends, and eventually forced again on the road as refugees. As the years pass they take their son to Jerusalem in a large group of kin and friends and then lose him on the return journey. Anybody who has thought they have lost a child even for a few minutes on a beach or in a park will find a chilling echo in Mary's cry, "Why have you done this to us?" Joseph of course drops out of the story and we have no idea what happened to him. But Mary and her other children are clearly nonplussed and disturbed when the grownup Jesus embarks on his preaching journeys, and wonder if he has gone out of his mind. And of course at the end Mary is left alone to watch her son die as a criminal, comforted and cared for not by her own family but by her son's friend.

But the truthfulness of the gospel narratives about the poverty, pain, insecurity and at times violence of the human condition is surely the point. At the Feast of the Incarnation we do not celebrate a birth in comfort and security. We kneel to adore a God who emptied himself to take on our humanity in all its complexity, to experience human life as we know it.

It is of course right that the focus of our worship at this season should be on the humanity of Christ. But we must never forget that Christ is also beyond time, and

indeed beyond the constraints of our human understanding. As the wonderful Easter Eve prayer puts it, as the priest marks the Easter candle, “Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to him, and all ages; To him be glory and power, through every age and for ever.” The writer to the Colossian Christians (Colossians ch.1), either Paul himself or using Paul’s name, writing probably before the gospels themselves, speaks of Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” All things were created in him, through him and for him, “he is before all things and in him all things hold together.” “In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell; and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things.”

The Christ of the Incarnation is not just the very human Christ of the gospel stories. He is in a sense a cosmic figure whose work of salvation and reconciliation, and indeed of incarnation itself, goes on in and beyond time. If this is so, then his presence is incarnate in us and in all our relationships and circumstances. He cries out to be born in us, to be formed in us, and so to form us in his likeness, if we consent as Mary did – “Be it unto me according to thy word.”

And what does this say about the messiness of human lives, the tragedies and sins which mar the whole human family? These, too, are the places where he involves himself with our flesh, takes our flesh upon and into himself. No place, no community, no human experience is outside his redeeming love, as he seeks to abide in us and with us.

I deliberately did not begin this homily with a text of scripture. But let me point you now to a passage on which we can fruitfully meditate as this Christmas season closes. John’s gospel opens of course with the luminous passage we hear at the main Mass of Christmas, of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The author returns to this theme even more personally in relation to each one of us in his account of the final discourses of Christ as he urgently spoke to his disciples, knowing that his hour had come. It is in the 14th chapter that we read of Jesus promising his friends that he would not leave them as orphans without comfort. He promises to see them again and share with them his new life. “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and

you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to themThose who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

So a new form of community, of family, is created, as we are drawn into the life of Christ and through him into the life of the Trinity. This is the stuff of serious Christmas joy, as Christ continues to clothe himself in human flesh – our flesh: and calls us to be clothed and enfolded in him.