

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford  
Feast of the Holy Family, 2020  
Mthr Judith Brown

Today we remember with thanksgiving the holy family into which Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph, hearing and obedient to God's calling, and so allowing the mystery of the Incarnation to happen - God himself taking our own human flesh in a very particular time and place, becoming part of a human family so that the whole of humanity might be brought back to its destiny as the holy family of God. It is a relatively modern feast of the church. Although it had its roots in popular piety it was not officially recognised until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was only made obligatory in the Roman calendar, just 100 years ago, in 1921.

I am sure that in some parts of the church there will be sermons preached today which focus on the sanctity of the family, and the significance of the family for providing children with stable homes and teaching them the Christian faith. Mary and Joseph, as devout Jews, clearly did this for Jesus. We get a hint of this in today's gospel, and through the accounts of his later life we know he was steeped in Jewish scripture, its stories and above all its psalms. But more than ever in our times, families come in many shapes, sizes and combinations as we well know. So often, too, the family is the place where people are most hurt, and abused. It is a particularly ambiguous feast to celebrate so soon after Christmas. Quite apart from the fears and pressures of the pandemic this year, Christmas is often at the best of times difficult for families and for individuals. Several generations are often bundled up close together, forced by social expectations to be jolly. Some families are painfully aware of absent faces and empty seats at the table. Some people are alone, having no families, or forced by circumstances to be far apart when others are celebrating. When I worked in Manchester University I worshipped at the Cathedral; and the late and much-loved Dean used to say that Christmas was Becher's Brook for families. (For those of you who do not take any notice of horse-racing, Becher's Brook was the most

dangerous fence in the Grand National, responsible for more horse falls and fatalities than any other until it was made safer quite recently.)

So let us avoid the anodyne and saccharine and ask what this feast might mean to us. I offer you the suggestion that at its heart there is the recognition that God calls us into community – different kinds of community – where we may help and nourish each other, and where God comes to meet us. If this pandemic has taught us anything it has taught us a little more about how much we need each other. Acts of kindness and support have made something more like normal life possible for many people: while acts of thoughtlessness and ignorance, and lack of concern for each other can harm or at worst kill.

Among our human communities are those of friendship. Friendships may start at school or university, within our local neighbourhoods, from shared interests – and for chaps particularly sport and team loyalty. Think of the Leeds rugby player who recently ran 7 marathons in 7 days to support his former team mate and friend who is suffering from Motor Neurone Disease. Friendship has rather taken a back seat these days in our understanding of relationships – giving place to assumptions that all relationships of affection and loyalty must be sexual partnerships. Other generations valued friendship far more highly, and ancient philosophers paid it a great deal of attention. The Greeks had a special word for the love of friends – *philia* - different from family love or from *eros*. In Christian tradition friendship has an honourable place: our own 12<sup>th</sup> century English saint, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote a treatise on it, following the ancient tradition of the “soul friend.” For him Christian friendships were a path to knowing God’s love and an expression of divine love. We know that Christ himself clearly valued his friends greatly. There were his 12 closest disciples, among whom was John, who we are told in the gospel that Jesus loved, and to whom he commended his mother as he was dying. Mary, Martha and Lazarus offered him warm human friendship in their home. He called his disciples “friends”, not pupils or followers or servants. He sat at table with them and after his resurrection led them into recognition of his risen identity at meals – in an inn at Emmaus or on the beach beside the Lake of Galilee. We, too, need to value our friends, to

nurture our friendships, and to recognise that in relationship with friends we grow in our humanity. They expand our hearts and call us out of ourselves: they grow our capacity for love and fidelity – our capacity to become more the sort of people God calls us to be.

Friendship is in a sense a freely chosen relationship but in expanding our human capacity for love, it leads us out of ourselves into empathy with others. This in turn can lead us into an even wider circle of concern – an increasing understanding that our neighbours in the broadest sense of that word are also part of our community. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan when a tricky lawyer asked Jesus, “and who is my neighbour?” He is the broken man beside the road whom nobody cares for, except the Samaritan passer by who recognises a wounded fellow human. C. S. Lewis in a famous war-time sermon preached here in Oxford in the University Church, spoke of the sanctity of our neighbours. He went so far as to say that after the Blessed Sacrament the holiest thing any of us touch is our neighbour. Fundamentally we all belong to one another as we are all children of God, made in his image. John Donne, put this in some of the greatest words in our English language – ‘No man is an island’.

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:*

*Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

But there is another community into which we as Christians are called – the more visible family of God himself, the church. We are called to be his holy family, celebrating our kinship through Christ's redeeming work, nourished at the altar, the family table, and then sent out to be his hands and feet to call the world into friendship with him. The church as the family of God merges into another foundational metaphor of the faith: that we are even more than family, we are indeed the body of Christ himself. Paul of course wrote famously on the different parts of that body and how all are necessary for the whole, as in the functioning of the human body. St. Teresa of Avila took up the theme in her meditation which I know I have quoted before – that Christ has no body now but ours. Our eyes, our hands and feet are those which he uses to serve and bless the world.

So today we pray that God will deepen our sense of the sanctity of our human communities, and through them will come to meet us on our human journeys just as he did with his friends in his incarnate life.