

THE HOLY FAMILY

Nicky Ing - 29th December 2002

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 111, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40.

This Sunday we celebrate the Holy Family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus... It is a time when we can think about our own family lives, and how we can live them in the light of the Gospel.

Christmas is traditionally a time when families get together. We have seen a lot of that in our community during this past week. People ask one another, 'are your family coming home... who will you have with you for Christmas?' and for those who are too far away to travel, cards are sent, and there is the telephone, and the email, which can draw us together across the miles and remind us that we are united as family even when we are separated by distance. I was privileged to take Holy Communion on Christmas Eve to a parishioner who had only just come home from hospital and whose family had gathered together from all over the country... it was lovely to be able to offer the sacrament to three generations of that family, all together for the first time in many months, and to be part of their celebrating Christmas, all in the Anglican tradition... there was a steadiness and a tangible sense of the presence of God's love, in that home... and of gratitude for the grandmother's ongoing recovery.

The Gospel reading today focuses on Joseph, Mary and Jesus, the Holy Family, as the baby Jesus is brought to the temple, where Simeon recognises him as the Saviour of Israel. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus mark him out as a special child with a unique destiny. He was the one through whom the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled... he would be, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, the hope and comfort of Israel, and a light for the nations. The symbol of light is an image which all the Gospel writers use to talk about the coming of Christ. They all talk about light... the light of the star... the light that shone around the shepherds, the true light that enlightens every human person. They all continue Isaiah's vision of light shining on those who live in darkness. John's Gospel which we read on Christmas Day, tells us that the light shines in the darkness, and somehow we accept this and we understand that this truth cannot be fully expressed in any other words. What John, Luke and Matthew all say about Christmas is that a light begins to shine: because Jesus is born. Who God is, in relationship to us, is fully revealed in the person of Jesus. Not in one saying, or one parable, or one miracle—but in all of him, in his life, death and resurrection—we finally have the light to see God.

We are not told much about the life of the Holy Family in the gospels. All we get are glimpses, and from them we can see that they had more than their share of troubles. There was no accommodation for them at the time of Jesus' birth, and they were poor...there were no luxuries in this family! When Jesus became a target for Herod's murderers (which Matthew fills in for us in Ch. 2 of his gospel) the little family had to go into exile in Egypt, where they lived for a period as foreigners, which must have been difficult for them. After they return to Nazareth later on, we read of the anxiety of Mary and Joseph when Jesus is missing for three days when they do not realise he is in the Temple, teaching the people there even though he is only 12 years old. Mary didn't always understand what Jesus was doing in his public ministry... she must

have anguished over him when she saw the tide of popularity turning against him and the authorities closing around him in the week leading to the crucifixion. Finally there was the agony of watching her son die, and the sorrow of that. Of course, when they brought the baby Jesus to the Temple for his Presentation, Mary and Joseph knew nothing of what was to come. They were devout Jews, who observed the Mosaic law concerning circumcision and the presentation of the first-born to the Lord. Luke in this story combines the Presentation of Jesus and the Purification of Mary... the presentation of the first-born was prescribed in Exodus 13: v15, ... recognising that the first born sons belong to God, who saved the Israelites' first-born when the first-born of the Egyptians were all destroyed at the Passover. The ritual purification of the mother forty days after giving birth was prescribed in the Levitical law (Lv.12:1-8). She was required to offer a lamb and a pigeon or a turtle dove, but a poor couple was allowed to present only two pigeons or doves. Luke has placed the emphasis here on the Presentation ceremony, and has Jesus presented in the temple where he would be recognised as the promised Saviour of Israel. Jesus is presented in the house of the Lord, to show that his life was to be offered in God's service. Simeon, an old, prayerful and holy man, together with Anna, who was devout and wise and also very old... had been waiting many years in the temple for the revelation of God's salvation.... And God had promised that Simeon would live to see the Messiah. Simeon immediately recognises Jesus as the Lord's anointed one... and he prophesies, in what is known as his NUNC DIMITTIS ... that Jesus will be for the glory of Israel and also a light of revelation to the Gentiles...that this would be salvation for the whole world...(Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, which tell of the bringing of the Gospel to the rest of the world). It is a wonderful prophecy...and a gift of knowledge... Simeon blesses the parents, but warns that the child will be a 'sign which is opposed' ... that Jesus' ministry will not be accepted by all... that suffering will follow... and that Mary will experience great sorrow. Anna too, in the temple, has the spiritual vision to see and recognise the long-awaited Messiah...these two elderly people who live in the light of prayerfulness, immediately recognise with great joy, the light and the hope that Christ will bring to the world. It is a holy moment...and reminds us, too, of the wisdom and knowledge which can come out of years of living close to the heart of God.... Do we in our modern times look to the elderly with respect, and value the wise reflections that such prayerfulness can offer us? I believe we can learn much from those who have been in the faith for many years... they have discerning powers.

The little Holy Family were to know sorrow, trouble and pain, and it can serve as a model for us too. In our humanity, today as in those early days, there is no such thing as a perfect family. Whilst every child is a gift from God, and has a unique destiny, that destiny is hidden from the parents. They wonder what will become of their children – naturally, they want the best for them, but all they can do is launch them on their way, let go and allow them freedom to live their lives, being careful not to obstruct God's plan for them, and praying for God to guide them in the choices they will have to make in life. Both parents and children contribute to the making of the atmosphere in the home, which is determined by the quality of the relationships within the home. But no family can be perfect, because all are visited by sorrow, misunderstandings, and problems of one kind or another...conflicts are sure to happen.... But it is the sacrifice and struggle which form the bonds between people, and we tend to come closer to one another in the hard times than in the good times. Ideally, home is where we can always return, and be sure of a real welcome. But we

would be painting a one-sided, rosy-tinted picture if we were not to accept the reality of disappointment and tragedy. Parents who see their children not practising the commitment of their baptism know the reality of pain...physically challenged people who find themselves on the edge of society are well aware of more than just bodily pain... those who experience failed relationships and fall out of love, feel hurt and outrage. There are vast numbers of children in our society who are victims of abuse, greed, power, drugs, neglect, hunger, disease and poverty. The ideal of the family is very fragile in our times, and is subject to stress and difficulty... often total disintegration...Apartheid did much to divide families over many years, but the spectre of AIDS now threatens to create whole generations of adults who have never known the reality of family life, and who will have missed out on moral and spiritual guidance when they needed it, in the early stages of life. This week Oprah Winfrey, during her visit to South Africa, asked: 'What happens to a generation of children left to fend for themselves? Unless someone does something now... the orphans will change the face of this country and the continent.' She is right...but it is going to take more than one person to do something! It was good to read the story in yesterday's paper about a lady called Penny Taylor, who, with her husband, has adopted two young girls, who would have otherwise have had a difficult start in life...cross-cultural adoption... and the provision of loving family support for those children; there are many such people who are willing to make sacrifices and do it joyfully, which is wonderful. But on the other hand we read this week about the claim that a cloned human baby girl has now been born...and that an organisation called 'Clonaid' has the ultimate goal of creating human life as a synthetic being in a laboratory... in order, as they say, to 'attain eternal life' and establish civilisation on another planet...we need to pray for wisdom for our world leaders in the face of such scientific developments... to prevent potential abuse of such knowledge and power...it could be so dangerous for the future of the family.

Today we have thought about Mary, Joseph, and their parenting of the infant Jesus. They cared for Jesus in his babyhood, taught him to walk, talk, pray, read, and cope with life's many demands. We could celebrate our own parents today... and our own homes, our childhood memories, both the positive and the negative... all that we have received through those who cared for us when we were young, all that we learned from them... which prepared us for adult life. Single parent families too, are becoming more common today at all levels of society, often because of bereavement, or divorce, or other circumstances. We need to keep single parents in our prayers ... it is not easy and they sacrifice much...we need to pray too, for children all over the world who have had a bad experience of family and home, and whose lives bear the marks of this loss, often severe damage. We thank God for those who foster young children who would otherwise have no family home... and who offer love and acceptance.

As we stand at the door of an 'Old' year, about to step forward into a 'New' year, maybe, as part of the Christian family here in this place, I can ask myself (and all of us) a couple of questions: How far am I willing to extend myself, to offer myself as 'family' for those in this community or beyond it, who may be lonely, or who may feel excluded, or who may long to feel part of a warm loving community? Has the coming of the Christ Child this week opened my eyes to needs that I had previously not noticed? Are there ways in which God is asking me to help make a difference in

the lives of others who are less fortunate than I am? Have I set any goals for 2003, which will help me to grow in my faith, to deepen my spiritual awareness of God?

Today we have come together to celebrate Eucharist. At the Eucharist we recall the seeming tragedy of the passion and death of Jesus. Before we say together: 'Christ is Risen' we must first say 'Christ has died.' The symbols of food and drink remind us powerfully that in our journey of faith we need to be nourished. The bread and wine, symbolizing the body and blood of Christ, assure us that we do not travel alone.... Whatever difficulties and sorrows we encounter on the journey, the Eucharist strengthens us to cope, and to keep moving forward in faith. May God encourage us, equip us, and send us out today as we face new challenges, and fresh demands on our energies ... and may the Light of Christ illumine our path, helping us to reflect His image, as we go forward into this New Year in the power of His Spirit. Amen.