

DIOCESE OF HALLAM

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family

To be read at all Masses 28/29 December 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This time in between Christmas and the New Year is a precious time to be spent with family and friends, but especially family, both immediate and extended. While we celebrate the life of our own families and the bonds of love and affection that bind us together, the church invites us to look to and celebrate the life of the newly formed family of Nazareth and see it as a model for our own.

The three readings chosen for today's feast each speak to us of a different aspect of the family that we find in the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth and to which we aspire in our own family. The readings, as one commentator suggests, speak of the significance within the family of the devotion of the father (and indirectly the mother), the devotion of children to parents and the debt of mutual love.

In today's gospel we are reminded that the uniqueness of the Holy Family of Nazareth did not shield them from some of the struggles and dangers that are part of the human condition. In particular, Matthew's story which is not found anywhere else in the gospels, tells us that when Jesus was still a toddler, he and his parents, Mary and Joseph, had to flee from Nazareth to Egypt fearing for his safety. We cannot imagine what it must have been like for them to suddenly find themselves having to leave their home and flee to another country not knowing, when, if ever, it would be possible for them to return home in safety. The decision to flee, Matthew tells us, was at the instruction of an angel in a dream. The instructions are all about the child and his wellbeing and safety which are entrusted to Joseph. The angel doesn't hold back and could not be more direct:

"Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt and stay there until I tell you....."

We are not privy to any advice Joseph may, or may not, have been given on how he might support his family in a land he did not know. He just has to trust the angel's message. Later in the story only when it was considered safe for the family to return home and the child's safety was assured, Joseph is given further instructions:

"Get up, take the child and his mother with you and go back to the land of Israel, for those who wanted to kill the child are dead."

The second reflection offered in the readings is that children owe their parents a debt of gratitude. This is beautifully and concretely stated in the first reading by its writer, Ben Sirach. There we are reminded that honour, respect, sympathy, and kindness should be the attitudes of children towards their parents. The language of Sirach puts flesh, if you like, on the commandment of love and a reminder that the family is where love is made concrete through the words, actions, gestures, and attitudes to those closest to us.

The third aspect of family life expressed in the readings for today's feast is that of mutual love. Paul writing to the church at Colossae paints a word picture of what a truly Christian family should look like. The members should be compassionate, kind, gentle and patient. He exhorts them to bear with one another and forgive each other. We all know that there is plenty of opportunity in the family to exercise both! And Paul's final point here is that the cord that holds all the different aspects of family life together is mutual love.

"Over all these clothes, to hold them together and complete them, put on love."

In the story of the Holy Family of Nazareth God's plan was accomplished. This is true of every family. It is in the family that God's plan for us is worked out most of the time. Perhaps today is an opportunity to reflect on and acknowledge this simple truth. An invitation, too, for us to be more fully present to each other and for each other in the coming year.

Precious things always need to be guarded and protected.

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