

## **Holy Family**

For most of us Christmas is when we can spend time with our families. It is a great joy when members of our families travel to be with us. That is not possible all the time, and sometimes it is a phone call or an email that connects us to those far away. Two of my sisters joined me for the Christmas evening meal. After the meal I was showing my sister Liz my little garden of beans and sweet corn. “Your father would be proud of you” she said. My father always had a wonderful vegetable garden. Then she said, “He would be proud of you anyway even if you didn’t grow beans.”

As I grow older I think I reflect more upon how important my family has been and is for me. I am the second youngest of seven children. My brother John, the eldest in the family was born 80 years ago tomorrow/ Monday. He died almost 61 years ago, the first of four members of the family including mum and dad, to take up their place in heaven.

On this feast of the Holy Family we are given readings from Scripture that we can draw something from no matter where we are on life’s journey in relation to our family. The reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus urges us to respect our fathers and honour our mothers. It has a special word for those who parents are aging. “My son, support your father in his old age, do not grieve him during his life. Even if his mind should fail, show him sympathy, do not despise him in your health and strength, for kindness to a father will not be forgotten”. Those words may be speaking also to those who are caring for a spouse suffering from dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

St Paul puts what he has to say about family in the context of the love that God has for us. It is his love for us that enables us to reach out in love to the members of our family. “Be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins.” His words about husbands wives and children can be easily dismissed, but they are worth pondering. “Wives, give way to your husbands as you should in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and treat them with

gentleness. Children, be obedient to your parents always. Parents, never drive your children to resentment or you will make them feel frustrated.”

Our gospel helps to understand that family was very important for Jesus too. Luke makes the point that Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish family who took very seriously their responsibilities to one another and to the God who gave them life and cared for them every day. Mary and Joseph had made room in their hearts and in their lives for the gift of their son. Now they were giving him back to the God from who he had come. This act of devotion becomes another great moment of revelation for the Holy Family.

When we look at today’s gospel we can see that when Jesus was taken to the temple he was warmly welcomed by Simeon and Anna. They welcomed Jesus because they were looking forward to his coming, what Luke calls the comforting of Israel. And because they were open and ready for the Lord’s coming God fills them with the gift of his Spirit. They are prophets who make known what human eyes cannot see. Simeon can tell us that the promise that God had made to him has now been revealed. In the child he sees the salvation of Israel. He reveals to Mary and Joseph and to all of us who this child is that is being presented to God in the temple. He speaks about his mission as bringing light to the pagans and glory to the people of Israel.

This child is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel. He will be a sign that is rejected. He speaks to Mary who here is the personification of the people of Israel. “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Israel will be a divided people, cut in half by the sword of God’s Word. Some will accept Jesus and rise to life in Him. Many will reject Him and fall. We are told here that Mary wondered at the things that were being said about Him. A little later we are told that she pondered all these things in her heart.

Luke tells us that when they had done everything that the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. They went back to that obscure place, to live a normal

family life. Those things that had been revealed in the temple about Jesus and his mission were not forgotten, but they were put aside. Jesus would not begin his mission for another thirty years. He had to learn what it meant to be fully human, so that he could fulfil his mission perfectly. He went home with Mary and Joseph to learn what it meant to be loved and to love, so that He could teach us all how much His Father loves us.

It is almost a foot note in the Gospel when Luke tells us, “Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God’s favour was with him.” But all that happened quietly yet very powerfully in a very ordinary family at Nazareth. Today, as we remember what happened at Nazareth we can thank God that he is present in every family, allowing us to grow to maturity, filling us with wisdom and teaching us that God’s favour is with us.