

## Solemnity of the Holy Family

### Mutuality, respect and service

Once the actual birth of Jesus has been celebrated, the days of Christmas continue and the Church's feasts begin to invite those who celebrate his birth to put his message into action.

If today had been a weekday we would have been celebrating the feast of St. Stephen who was the first Christian Martyr. He was stoned outside the city walls at Jerusalem. The feast of the first martyr follows directly on the birth of Jesus to remind us that the love Jesus has for us and, therefore, the love we must have for another, is sacrificial. We know, as his disciples, that this love is all about using and spending our lives for the good of others.

It is, though, not St. Stephen that we honour today. It is, because it is the first Sunday after Christmas, the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. There is a clear and obvious connection with Christmas because it was into the lives of these two that Jesus was born and it was they who cared for him and watched him grow up. We honour Mary and Joseph because of their part in the upbringing of Jesus and that is where today's feast connects with that of St. Stephen, which is normally today. The love we see in the relationship of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is a love that is sacrificial. Sacrificial in that they poured out their lives in love for one another just as St. Stephen did and just as Jesus did in his birth, life, death and resurrection.

It is so often the case that in situations where countries are experiencing poverty and the uncertainty and change of political instability that those on the edge of society suffer particular hardship. Jesus was born into such a situation and the picture that Matthew paints in today's Gospel is one in which Joseph, Mary and Jesus are living the life of itinerant refugees until they settled in the relative safety of that out of the way place called Nazareth in Galilee out of which, we are told in the Gospel, that no good can come. Jesus ended up in place that was not worth bothering with from a political point of view.

The safety and upbringing of Jesus depended upon the mutual concern and respect that the members of this family had for one another, because in each case they are more concerned for others than they are for themselves. They experienced extreme difficulty as so many families do but that readiness to give their lives for each other meant that as a family unit they were stronger than the forces that constantly threatened them. This is hardly surprising because we know and believe that when a man and woman commit to each other in love, a love which opens to new life in children, the Spirit of God is present in his transforming and transfiguring power.

Today's feast therefore overlaps and connects with the constant teaching of the Church that it is the family unit that is not only a vital building block in a just and healthy society but that the family, guided by the principles of Christian life is the unit at the heart of the Church where the Good News of Jesus takes concrete form bringing new life and hope. The beneficiaries are the members of the family and all those others with whom the family is ready to make any kind of connection.

Appropriately, as families are gathered for the celebration of the Lord's birth, we celebrate and give thanks for the gift of the Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus and our own families as well. As members of the Catholic Christian Church we know that the family unit, because of the gift of the Spirit and because it is based and built upon the sacrificial love of Christ is where the presence of Christ and his message finds a clear and beautiful focus.

At this stage, as a celibate priest whose experience of family life is increasingly remote, I want to say thank you to our families. It is a privilege to know and share the hardships and the challenges that make Christian family life so difficult. It is hugely encouraging for me to see how mutual concern and respect and persevering devotion to service, which is sacrificial in the quality of its love, is alive in the family life of our parish. I see it reflected so clearly in the faith and commitment of our young people which I personally find so moving and a source of great strength.

The news from the survey yesterday that claims that this country is no longer Christian and no longer has any religious base because less than 50% claim any belief, could be a cause of discouragement. Don't let that happen. Rather let us renew our belief and conviction that the message of Christ, in all its richness has found a home with us. Whether we are members of families or single people without that commitment let us never forget that the more our love models itself on that of Christ the more his Spirit will work in our lives bringing reconciliation and peace.

No mention of the Holy Family or any family is complete if we do not hold in our prayer and affection those whose family life is experiencing or has experienced breakdown and the pain of separation and divorce. If our love is worthy of the name Christian our hearts must be large enough to embrace those who experience difficulty in our prayer and in our affection and compassion.

Nor must those who are single be forgotten. Not all of us are called to family life and Jesus himself gave his life in such a sacrificial way that his family became the whole of humanity and the whole of creation. Perhaps those of us who are single must live our lives in the same sacrificial way as those who are married. Such a challenge requires particularly strenuous discipline and self-forgetfulness.

As always St. Paul sums up the message most perfectly "You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you and you should 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. The Lord has forgiven you. Now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it was for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful.

