

THE HOLY FAMILY SERMON ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

There is a shrine to the Virgin Mary at Walsingham in England. During the 11th century a woman there had a vision of Mary who told her to build a house. The house was to be a replica of the home of Mary, Joseph and Jesus at Nazareth. The woman was given the details of the house and she built a small single room dwelling. Walsingham soon became a place of pilgrimage. It still is today all these centuries later. The house of Nazareth is still there but oh how different it looks. The walls have paintings of angels and saints all over them. There's an altar in the house with huge candlesticks and hanging lights.

And over the top of it all a large church has been built to house the pilgrims who come to worship. The simple house of the holy family of Nazareth has been turned into something else. In an effort to preserve it, in an effort to help people realise the holiness of it, the house has changed completely. It is so adorned and embellished that it has no appearance of being a house at all.

When I visited Walsingham I found it difficult to feel anything of the family life the house was supposed to represent.

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The painting of Jesus Mary and Joseph was so pretty there was nothing I recognised of family life.

One thing the shrine of Walsingham did for me was to make me realise how we sentimentalize the Holy Family of Jesus Mary and Joseph. The paintings we see, the stained glass windows we create, all lead us to imagine a picture of perfection. Think too about the hymns we sing describing this family. We get the image of these three people living in perfect harmony with one another and with God.

We all know that family life is not like that. If we took the trouble to examine the scripture we would see that the Holy Family isn't like that either. This is no nice sweet gentile family like the images we portray. In reality this is a very radical family. Here is Mary, an unmarried mother who claims to be a Virgin. She's a young woman of about 17.

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Then there's Joseph, probably an older man and not the father of the child but who adopts the child as his own when he marries the mother.

And Jesus: what does one say about a child who is reputed to be the Son of God. This child's presence is enough to have all the other male children killed.

These strange people claim to have been visited by angels with messages from God.

The life circumstances of this family are not exactly idyllic either. Today's Gospel tells us of Jesus being presented in the Temple. Here he is proclaimed to be the long awaited messiah. Yet Mary is also warned of the pain she and her son would suffer.

The other stories of the Holy Family are far from idyllic. There's the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath, so the family become refugees. When they return to Israel Jesus gets lost in the Temple. He is scolded when found because his parents were worried sick when they couldn't find him.

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The Holy Family, like our own families, is not all sweetness and light. These stories tell us quite clearly about the ordinary stresses and strains of a living and

growing community of people who have to live in difficult circumstances. These are people who have to learn to get along with each other. Jesus family was subject to all the things families still suffer as living and growing communities.

We have seen in recent weeks some devastating things happen to families. In Australia, Pakistan, America families struggle to cope with the horrors of violence. Here families struggle after road accidents, with family violence and with poverty. The so called joys of Christmas are far removed from many families.

And yet looking at the family of Jesus we see the same things happened for them. Somehow we still celebrate, not because everything is alright with the world. We celebrate because we know, even in the midst of all the pleasure and pain that make up life, we are not abandoned by God.

The Holy Family reminds us again of the Christmas message God is with us.

So if God is with us how does that make a difference? How do we respond?

First I think we have to consider who constitutes our family. Jesus was radical enough to say that “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. “ Jesus extends the concept of family to include those with whom he shared faith in God. So our family may not be just blood relatives. It may also be those we treat as our primary community. These are the people who make us feel alive and growing as a community should be.

Then we consider how we are family together. Does our family, however we define it, express the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, the welcoming and partings that constitute the life of any community. Families are places to learn how to be loved. Maybe that’s the most difficult challenge of family life.

It’s not always easy to accept love. Love is sometimes comforting and nurturing. It’s also demanding, prodding and challenging. In order to live and grow, love has to be all of those things. Family life is about both giving and receiving love. And it’s not so much about giving love that’s difficult. The difficulty often lies more in receiving love.

Mary and Joseph had to learn how to be loved by God in a new and radical way. Being loved was not easy for them either. Together with Jesus they became for us a model of a living and growing community. They were a community struggling with the everyday occurrences of life. A community struggling to understand and come to terms with God and the strange things their God seemed to ask of them. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are a community learning what it means to be loved by God and one another.

Perhaps we can enter the uncertainty of this New Year with the certainty of God’s love for us. A God whose love may make strange demands, but whose demands are always loving. Maybe our resolution could be to learn to receive God’s love graciously. Like the Holy Family living with the hardships of becoming a community we too try to make sense of our lives. We try to understand what it means to have God with us; this love of God which comes to us in such strange ways.

A love which challenges, prods, nurtures, comforts: a love which draws us into community; a love which always seeks to draw us back to God. This is the love which is our hope for the future.