

## Homily for The Feast of The Holy Family 2019

As I sat down to think about what to say today, I was aware that speaking about the family is always a difficult thing to do. For many people, family life has not been, or is not, a happy place; for others it has been gloriously happy but has now changed, or ended, leaving them bereft. So I want to acknowledge that, and I don't want to make anyone feel bad, but I do want to use this feast to try and understand a little more about what this feast can tell us about what it means to be human. So I hope you will bear with me.

The Gospel reading for today shows us two very different ways in which two very different men react to God's outrageous intervention in the world. God has stepped in to disrupt the way in which the world was trundling along, and for those at the heart of the story this daring act of God is bemusing, threatening and challenging.

First of all, there is Herod. He is deeply affected by what the wise men have told him about the birth of a new king. He is crafty enough to find out when the child was born, but murder is always in his heart. He lurks around in the background of this feast as a counter-example, a sign of one for whom family means nothing. At this stage he has already murdered three of his sons to protect his own power, so we can be sure that from the moment he hears about Jesus, blood is on his mind. He is very far from a good example of family life. The truth is that the family will always be a threat to the radical individualist like Herod. The family works on the basis that a group of people act together to do things that may not be the choice of all of them, may involve some element of cost to one or more of them, but they do it because human beings are created to depend on one another, to act together for some common goal, and on occasion to sacrifice their own goals or interests for the good of the others. This is anathema to the radical individualist, who sees life as a competition in which all people are set against all others; for him, to make a sacrifice for the good of others is madness, because it gives them a leg up in the scramble for the top of the heap. The family will always be a threat to the person who sees each person as an individual in competition with everyone else, and the family will always stand as an accuser in a culture that is based on individualism, fragmentation and division.

In contrast to Herod, there is Joseph. As we discovered last Sunday, already his whole world has been turned on its head, and all his expectations for family life have been uprooted. Fleeing into Egypt with his wife and a newborn child was never a part of his plan. But because Joseph, unlike Herod, gets the meaning of family life, gets the fact that human beings are created to be interdependent, looking to one another for strength, he takes up the challenge and leads his family to safety.

What a frightening journey it must have been for Mary and Joseph. The stakes could hardly have been higher. They have both been visited by angels, both been told just who this child is, what his role is, and how much humanity needs him. They are vulnerable, unable to travel fast, and unable to disguise themselves. Every person they meet on the road is a threat, every town or village they pass

through is a danger point. Joseph throws himself wholeheartedly into something he had never planned for, and keeps his family safe. Already, though, Herod's anger and violence, his obsession with protecting his own power, have had strange and unintended consequences. The Son of God, who has yet spoken not a word, passes into Egypt, and God's rescue mission is spreading. Egypt becomes the second country in the world to be blessed by the presence of God's Son. The game is on, and the seeds of the word are spreading. Did anyone the family met in Egypt have any idea who they had met? Probably not, but we can imagine that just the presence of the Holy Family was enough to bless the people that they met. What wouldn't we give to be standing at the roadside as they passed by!

When they finally returned home, the Holy Family must have left behind some special memories among the people who met them in Egypt. And no doubt they brought back plenty of their own memories, too. The family is a great repository of stories, a place where stories are experienced, then repeated and retold. No doubt over the years Mary and Joseph reminded each other of the events of the Flight into Egypt, of the places they stopped and the people they met, as well as what happened when they were staying in a foreign country. Those stories would have been shared with Jesus too, and although he was such a young refugee, the story of their flight would have been one he came to know well. Our families are important places, because they are the places where our stories are experienced, told, retold, and in the retelling they are understood and internalized. It is in our families that we dare to let people know us, and we come to know them, and our lives are made better by the knowing, and better still by the being known. The radical individualist has only stories about himself, stories in which he is the hero; in the family the stories are rich and varied, and the roles of hero and walk-on player rotate around the cast.

Herod and Joseph have radically different views of where life finds its value. Joseph leads us to the 'virtues of family life' that the Collect talks of, the virtues St Paul lists in the second reading: sincere compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and gratitude. Where our family stories meet the story of the Holy Family, these have the chance to take root and flourish, far from the malevolent self-promotion that poisons Herod's family.