

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Feast of The Holy Family (Year %) 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023

Just a few days on from the birth of the Saviour, we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. This first little church, where a home is made for God, a home fortified and sanctified by love, is presented to us to draw us away from the complexity of our daily lives. The Church holds it up for us and says 'Look, look and wonder; it is enough'. There are plenty of problems facing the Holy Family, plenty of challenges, but they are not overwhelmed by them. Underlying the simple faith of this little home is a deep sense of gratitude. We know that Mary is a woman of gratitude, as we have heard her sing her thanks 'My soul magnifies the Lord'. Perhaps as they began to make a space in their lives for the precious gift that they have received, they sang together the psalm we have used today:

Give thanks to the Lord, tell his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
O sing to him, sing his praise;  
tell all his wonderful works!

It is their gratitude that allows Mary and Joseph to see beyond the challenges, and the anxieties, and the obstacles. The Lord has done great things, and he has kept his promises, and all will be well.

As we reach the last day of the old year, perhaps we would be wise to join them in their thanksgiving. If gratitude was the corner stone on which the Holy Family was built, it would be a good foundation for our homes and our families too. In a comfortable and prosperous society there is always a temptation to take what we have for granted, and perhaps the last day of the year is a good time to reject that.

I came across a quotation from Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century Dominican, in which he said 'If the only prayer you said was 'Thank You', that would be enough'. He isn't suggesting that we should abandon all other prayer, but there is something about an open-hearted and humble thanksgiving that does go straight to the heart of God. Eucharist is a word that means 'thanksgiving', and so what we do every Sunday is to praise and thank God for his gifts to us.

So as we celebrate this last day of the year, perhaps we could join the Holy Family in thanksgiving; join the old man Simeon, standing in the Temple and praising God because now, at last, all he had hoped for has been granted to him; join the countless holy ones down the centuries who have been women and men of thanksgiving.

We have life and, in various degrees, health: thanks be to God.

We have homes, families, friends; places to live and people to care about us; a Church community where we are nourished, fed and find friendship; thanks be to God.

We have food on the table and heat to warm us; we live, unlike much of the world, in peace and unlike most of the world in plenty: thanks be to God.

We have, in this past year, all of us received acts of kindness, heard words of tenderness, known that someone cares about us, and for all of these and the people who shared them with us, we can be so grateful: thanks be to God.

Even in times of loss and sadness, there is a space for thanksgiving; even where we have lost people we loved, there is much to be grateful for - even where there were not enough years together, we can be so grateful for the ones that there were: thanks be to God.

Some of us have received the gift of new life - new children, new grandchildren, great grandchildren, and there is no real response to these gifts but: thanks be to God.

Around us there is a world that is in many ways stained and scarred by human greed, but which underneath all that bears an extraordinary beauty, and which speaks to us of the one who dreamed it into being: thanks be to God.

We have had the chance to hear words of salvation, tenderness, hope and renewal from the lips of the Saviour; we have met him in the sacraments, and been touched by his mercy and grace: thanks be to God.

The litany could go on, and each of us can add our own thanksgivings to it. None of this is something that we have earned by our own virtue or cleverness; it all comes to us as a gift. How easily we take it all for granted, and how good it is to stop for a moment and be thankful. No doubt the New Year will bring its share of challenges, losses, sadness, anxiety and change; but, just as The Holy Family could face all their challenges because their lives were built on a radical gratitude, so we, too, can face the year ahead. Discovering the love and mercy of God, the former slave St Josephine Bakhita, whose life had been full of so many sorrows, said: "I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good." ( Quoted in Pope Benedict Spe Salvi). Like her, we are loved with a love that cannot be destroyed, will never be withdrawn, which is given freely and without charge: so all will be well.

‘ If the only prayer you said was ‘Thank You’, that would be enough’. On this last day of the old year, let us make our prayer be a heartfelt, radical, humble ‘Thanks be to God’.