

## Feast of the Holy Family

After celebrating the Feast of the Birth of Jesus, the Church invites us to reflect on family. In the Gospel we see Joseph and Mary taking the newly born Jesus to the temple. The old priest, Simeon, takes Jesus and holds him close to his breast. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he recognizes Jesus as the promised Messiah, and as the one sent by God to enlighten the whole world. Jesus will do this by revealing God as the lover, the healer, the redeemer of the whole human race. We are being invited to follow Simeon's example. As we, too, hold Jesus close, let us open our heart to welcome the healing and the liberation and the love that we, and all the members of our family, need.

Some of you, like myself, do not have your own children. Some have entered into a relationship with the hope of having a family, but have found yourselves unable to do so, or the relationship did not continue and you have been left disappointed. Others have had children but suffer the hurt of having your family broken for reasons over which you have little or no control. Family can be the place where we experience our deepest joys and also our most profound and lasting hurts. But whatever our situation we all have connections that bind us to the human race through our mother or father, our brothers or sisters, our aunts, uncles or cousins. Family is something that affects us all and we are invited to reflect on our experience, with its joys and its pains, in the company of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

In the First Reading, Hannah consecrates her child Samuel to God. Most of us are reminded of what our parents did for us when they consecrated us as children through the sacrament of baptism. They wanted us to belong to a large family of faith in which we would listen to God's word, welcome Jesus into our souls in communion and find forgiveness for our sins. As members of Christ's Body in the world, we would share in his mission of 'harnessing for God the energies of love' (Teilhard de Chardin): our own energy and that of those with whom life would bring us in contact. Those of you who have children are reminded of the sacred obligation which you undertook in having them baptised.

We might reflect also on the parish as a family, for we all have a special contribution to make in making this a prayerful and welcoming place where people can find a home. For some it is their most significant family.

I would like to reflect with you on two significant developments that affect our experience of family. The first is the very different role played by women in public life than was the case even fifty years ago. This change has hugely benefited the community. The social fabric of our society has been greatly enriched by women whose special nurturing qualities, which earlier were exercised largely in the home and local community, are now enriching almost every sphere of public life. However, this has put women under great pressure and has also impacted on the family. We have much to do in re-organising social structures to welcome women better into public life, while supporting their irreplaceable role in the family. Men and women must work together for our mutual healing and enrichment. Some of us would dearly like to see the Church embrace this movement more wholeheartedly, in the knowledge that organisational leadership is best when men and women share their gifts.

It is interesting in this context to hear Paul speaking of his relationship to the community of

Thessalonica as being that of a mother and a father: 'We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children'(1Thessalonians 2:7-11). Saint Augustine reminds us that Paul is simply following the example of Jesus: 'Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.'

This brings me to my second reflection. Because of a mistaken notion of the biology of human generation, and because public discourse in the past was largely a male creation, God in the past was almost exclusively spoken of in male terms. Both men and women have suffered from this distortion, and our language must change if our spirituality is to be healthy. This change of language must benefit the family. It is interesting to read the following from Anselm, a twelfth century saint and Archbishop of Canterbury: 'Good Jesus, are not you also a mother, who like a hen gathers your chicks beneath your wings?'

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth century English mystic constantly speaks of God and of Jesus as mother and father. She writes: 'I saw that God rejoices that he is our Father, and God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true Spouse, and that our soul is his beloved wife' (Showings, chapter 52). 'In making us, God almighty is our loving Father, and God all wisdom is our loving Mother, with the love and the goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord'(Showings, chapter 58). 'As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother'(Showings chapter 59).

She goes on to say: 'We are brought back by the motherhood of mercy and grace into our natural place, in which we were created by the motherhood of love, a mother's love which never leaves us ... Our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carries us within him in love and travail, until the full time when he wanted to suffer the sharpest thorns and cruel pains that ever were or will be, and at last he died. And when he had finished and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love ... He could not die any more, but he did not want to cease working; therefore he must needs nourish us, for the precious love of motherhood has made him our debtor. The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life; and with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us most mercifully and most graciously ... The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the Godhead and the joy of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss' (Showings, chapter 60)

On this feast of the Holy Family let us renew our commitment to our own family. This includes a searching of our souls to see if, with God's grace, we can move towards resolving any hurts that keep the family divided. Let us commit ourselves also to work for social and especially church structures that welcome men and women to enrich us by sharing their special gifts. Let us reflect more deeply on the feminine as well as the masculine experience of love as we look to

God, our Father-Mother. By baptism we are all brothers and sisters and we are all called to be fathers and mothers to each other as well. We need everyone's gift, everyone's love, for we need each other to be sacraments of the fatherly and motherly love of God.