

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a confession to make: I'm not as good as sending Christmas cards as I used to be. In the pre-internet days, which many of you will remember, I would send cards to almost everyone I knew. When I lived in England, I mailed Christmas cards every year to family and friends in New Zealand. In those days there were two categories of mail: sea mail and air mail. Cards sent by air mail took about a week to arrive, whereas those sent by sea-mail took about two months or more. Sea mail had the one advantage of costing a lot less than air mail. However, you had to remember to buy your cards early and send them in time. I did this one year, and then two weeks later I got return letters from family and friends asking me, "why had I sent them a Christmas card in October?" It seems they had all gone airmail by mistake.

As for the type of Christmas card, I usually choose religious ones. You know, with Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the manger, sometimes with shepherds or Magi. A few years ago I discovered a card with a nativity theme which was not typical. On the cover was the painting by the Italian artist Baciccio of Saint Joseph and the Infant Christ. The original painting hangs in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, where I saw it for the first time in 2009.

The card is striking for many reasons: first, it is a Christmas card of the baby Jesus without Mary, his mother. Instead, Joseph takes up most of the picture. In his arms he holds the baby Jesus, who plays with Joseph's beard. The second striking feature is the look of utter joy and tenderness in Joseph's face. He looks directly at Jesus, and through him we share the joy of what it means to be a parent. This card is one of my favorite Christmas cards, because I know that when people see it for the first time they are surprised. Joseph is usually depicted as the husband and protector the Mary and Jesus, but this picture reveals him as a loving parent.

This is by way of introduction to the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, which we are celebrating today. A few days ago at Christmas we celebrated the birth of Jesus, who enters our world as a baby in a family. There he will be for most of his life. Remember that the time of Jesus' ministry among us as an adult was perhaps no more than three years. While his preparation for ministry takes place among the religious and social milieu of his day, it is primarily in the family of Mary and Joseph that Jesus is being made ready for his mission.

Given that most of Jesus' life was spent in this family, it is frustrating that we know so little about this formative period. What we do know is found in the gospel writings. For example, today's gospel reading describes the time when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in order to present him to the Lord. The baby would have been 33 days old at the time. Because the offering of the parents was two doves, we can surmise that Joseph and Mary were not rich.

The other early glimpse of family life relates the time when Jesus, then twelve years of age, went to Jerusalem with his parents for the annual celebration of the Passover. The family travel in a group of friends and stay seven days. On the journey home there is a mixup and it turns out Jesus is not with them. Joseph and Mary return to Jerusalem and eventually find

their son. He is sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. He returns with Joseph and Mary to Nazareth and, the gospel states, he is “obedient to them.” In other words, the parents set his boundaries which Jesus observes.

The next time we hear about Jesus he is an adult, and John the Baptist is preparing his way.

I don't want to speculate on what Jesus was doing between the ages of 12 and 30. Without evidence, we cannot say. What is significant is that at the wedding at Cana, Jesus's mother is there with him. It is likely that that Jesus' relationship to his mother was a life-long one.

In the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, God has given us a model for family life. God blesses the family and sanctifies it, which is why we call it a *Holy Family*. Although Joseph and Mary are by no means wealthy, they are rich in love. Jesus could not have learnt to love so well without them.

This family, being faithful Jews, would have followed the law which contains within it rules on married life. That's what part of our second reading is about. The letter to the Colossians has a sentence in it which I am sure would have caused eyebrows to be raised. I included it because 1. it is the set reading for the day and 2. because I don't believe in omitting parts of the Bible we don't like or agree with. The line is “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” It is followed by these other verses,

“Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.”

This is advice given to first century Jews. Is it still relevant today? I'll let you decide. The point of it is to show that families need an organizing principle to function effectively. Families without boundaries or rules can quickly become problematic. On the other hand, those families which lean too heavily on rules can become problematic too. It's all a question of balance, and you will do all right if you have love and forgiveness at the center.

I know what you're thinking: not everyone can be like the Holy Family. But you know, I believe that everyone *can* be like the Holy Family, provided you have love from above and love from within. The best advice I ever had on raising children was given to me by my mother-in-law. It was these two words, “Love them.” The power of family life is that it changes everyone in it, if you allow that change to happen. The term I used of Jesus earlier was that of “growth”. To grow in the fullness of who we are means to be accepted and cherished for who you are; when this happens within a family, children are more likely to lead fulfilled and happy lives. The key is love: love involves sacrifice and putting the needs of others before your own needs.

The God of love chose a loving family in which his son would grow. When Jesus eventually left home, he went out and built a family of his own, called the Church. It is interesting to note that among his closest disciples were two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Family was important to Jesus. Today, Jesus is still calling new members into this family. The Church is a worldwide family containing millions of members who can

trace their roots back to that first, humble Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It is a family bound together by Faith, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit.

What keeps our Church family strong are the lessons and values we learn in family life. These include mutual respect, acceptance, support, nurture, trust, obedience, shared responsibilities, discipline in religious observance, a willingness to serve others and, above all, love.

Love is the key and love connects us directly with the source of love, who is God. Well, you might argue, that would have been easier for Mary and Joseph, whose child was the Son of God. But love was not only present in him. It is something God shares with all of us - all have a need for love and a need to receive love. And we learn about this in families, for better or worse. When building a family ourselves, let us keep an eye on the Holy Family and learn from them. In the humble town of Nazareth, the King of love was raised, and he reaches out to us today as a Savior, a friend and a brother.

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Father David Beresford