

HOLY FAMILY – January 2006
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Every year Mary and Joseph travelled to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover despite the rigours of the journey and political uncertainties. They wanted to obey the command that the Passover was to be celebrated as a family, and, I imagine, to set a good example to their Son. In today's Gospel reading we see their fearful search for their twelve year old, their relief at finding Him after three days, and deflation when He explains that He must attend to His Father's affairs. We hear the first recorded words of the Saviour and His commitment to the work of our redemption.

The story of this family always seems to me to be utterly without glamour and with a lot of gritty realism. Think of the way in which Joseph learnt of Mary's pregnancy; the location of the child's birth; the family's desperate flight to Egypt; Mary watching the tortured body of Her Son on the cross. Yet not only was this a holy family- it was *the* holy family. And the way in which we remember, commemorate, venerate this family cannot colour the reality with sentimentalism. We have to find ways of telling of the persecuted Jewish family who were not spared the mess of life, but whose events, whose relationships, whose free responses were underpinned by a divine grace that was not challenged, not limited by what it faced. Here in this family we see a very real love and a very real holiness, with neither bought on the cheap. Here in this family we see God at work, plunging through His family into our families.

This is what Christians should be thinking about on this festival- this fresh expression of the absolute humanity of Jesus Christ. That God became incarnate in a family, and a family just like one of ours- not a royal family, but a family facing struggles and difficulties, as well as moments of joy. Yet, unfortunately, the Christian faith in the here-and-now seems to have utterly distorted, maybe even perverted, the teaching of our faith on the family and family life.

It seems to me that the family has become some sort of idol. On one hand, we can get away with saying anything, we can exercise our worst prejudices and intolerances in the name of "family values". On the other hand, we cannot escape the vague suggestion that family life is something that all ought to aspire to. That if we cannot produce a spouse and 2.4 children we have somehow failed or, at least, to have fallen short of the intended glory. It gets worse: I've even heard it suggested that people who are married are called to witness by example to those who are not married of what they should be doing. We've lost any idea of Christian singleness, let alone those called to live in community.

We've also forgotten the radical re-evaluation that Jesus gave the family. He went almost out of his way to create a surrogate family around himself. "Here are my mother and my brothers"- all those who heard and obeyed the word constituted a new family, and should treat one another accordingly. It's there in black and white in the gospels: Jesus called for a deep and shocking disloyalty to the human and nation-defining family that his hearers knew; it was to be replaced by a total devotion and loyalty to Jesus himself, and to the others who also followed Him.

The resorted Israel was not to be constituted by family units, but by loyalty to Jesus. The new Israel was, therefore, in principle open to all- as the prophets foretold, many would come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God. The Son of God and his message trump symbolic family obligations. So we see Jesus creating a new symbol, which drew into itself the symbolism of family and nation that had characterised mainstream Israel. A symbol of a new sort of family characterised by allegiance to Jesus, a family open to all who shared his agenda, even tax-collectors and sinners.

There is, then, a strange tension. On the one hand, a pull towards family life; on the other, a call to leave family loyalties behind in order to follow Jesus. A tension that may be resolved by re-discovering what it means to be both Christian and single. Here we hit a major difference between Christianity and Judaism: Christians do not have to have children in order to be Christians; God has not willed his church to grow through biology, but through witness and conversion.

When singleness is perceived as a practice of the church it becomes profoundly clear that the church has accepted and wishes to participate in the hope that God secured through Christ's cross, resurrection and ascension. Singleness embodies the hope that God's kingdom has come, is present, and is still to come. Accordingly, we cannot help but witness this good news to others. These others may be relatives, or people of other families who have never heard the name of Jesus. When we lose the significance of singleness, we buy into the idea that the Gospel cannot be received by those who have not been raised in it. Put it like this: I think that the obsessive Christian justification of the family may be the result of Christians no longer believing the gospel to be true or joyful.

This does not mean that marrying or having children is in any way a less worthy way to be a Christian. Quite the opposite. But marriage is a vocation- not a requirement; and this gives it a new dignity. Marriage for Christians cannot be a means for self-fulfilment but, rather, a way to build, to grow the church. We do not learn to love in marriage: rather, love in marriage is possible because God has loved us first.

This is one of those parts of the Christian faith that does not sit comfortably with us. But we can only make sense of Christian family-life, Christian singleness, Christian marriage in the wider context of the Christian church- a more determinative community or body than any of these things. Family life, singleness, marriage- not matters of individual satisfaction, but what must be for at least us practices of the church.

Let me give the last word to Aquinas. What pervades Thomas's thought is an understanding that there is no good thing which is not, of its nature, something to be shared. I don't mean something we *ought* to share but something which can only exist through being shared.: there is no joy which is not of its essence something shared; truth comes to us in its being shared -- a private truth is a small truth, barely a truth at all.

We exist because God, as the supreme Good, shares truth, love and joy with all his creation, and all creation can only receive these goods as things to be shared. Mary

and Joseph bring him to the temple because no child belongs wholly and completely to its parents. The child belongs first to God, then to his parents and through them to society.

As Jesus grows, he will belong to himself, but to God first. I don't say here that *even* Jesus has to grow, but *especially* Jesus. 'Jesus increased in wisdom, age and grace before God and Men'. The life of Jesus will reveal that the good things which sustain us in this life, are in fact the life of God.

God the Father loves his Son through the love of Mary and Joseph; the fire radiates through them and from them, out into the world.