

Holy Family (B)

31st December 2023

'Lessons at the School of Nazareth'

Gen 15; 21: *Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.*

Ps 104: *He, the Lord, is our God. He remembers His covenant for ever.*

Heb 11: the faith of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob.

Lk 2: 22–40: Presentation in the Temple

So, let's be clear — *just how long is Christmas?* Is it merely the one day (25th Dec)? Is it an octave (to 1st Jan)? Is it the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' (to Epiphany, 6th Jan)? Is it the set of days up to and including the Baptism of the Lord (this year, 8th Jan)? Or is it a full 40 days to the feast of Candlemas (2nd Feb)? Well, it's all of those answers in one way or another. Whatever Christmas is, for us as Christians it's definitely a *season*, and not a day! Do we throw out the tree and the decorations on Boxing Day? Not at all! — Christmas has barely begun then! Christmas, like Advent, Lent, or Eastertide, is a season. It's a short season, admittedly, shorter than any of those other 3 mentioned, but still a season: it starts with the octave concluding on 1st Jan (Solemnity of Mary Mother of God), including this Sunday, feast of the Holy Family; it continues on to the 2nd-greatest feast of the season, Epiphany, celebration of the Magi's appearing; and then

concludes with the final feast of the Baptism of the Lord (normally a Sunday, but some years, like this one, a Monday). Counting 40 days to the Presentation of the Lord (cf. today's Gospel) is also what was often done in mediaeval England, with ongoing festivities, and certainly in some places the Christmas Crib still stays up until that time. After Covid, at Christmas 2020 I definitely left the parish Crib up till Candlemas — we all needed cheering up, then! — and it was much appreciated. But to all intents and purposes the Christmas season proper — with white vestments — ends after we've jumped forward those 30 years to the Lord's Baptism. But that still gives us, typically, 2–3 weeks to keep this Christmas season, a precious time when often the pressures of work are a bit less. Let's savour it!

Most years, both as a student in Cambridge, as a seminarian in Rome, and now as a priest, I have generally been able to go home (to my family) at Christmas, at least for some days ... though for all the years I was a hospital chaplain (5 Christmases) that wasn't possible: I had to

remain on-call and within about 20–30mins' drive of both my hospitals. Like me in those days, some of you weren't able to be with family for Christmas this year — it's just too far away; but admittedly it's not easy: no matter who or what the family, it's generally where we would like to be. There's a link between the family of our birth and upbringing, and the place where we want to come home to, especially to celebrate Christmas and such like.

It always strikes me as amazing that the Son of God spent *90 per cent* of His earthly life in the family home and workplace. Only 3 of His 30-something years did He spend in journeying and preaching and healing and teaching His disciples. The *previous 30 years* he spent with Joseph (until he died) and Mary, as a boy and as a working man in the carpentry trade. Doesn't this astound us, if we really think about it? — the Son of God 'wasting His time' in a Nazareth workshop, when He could have been teaching more people about God, and saving the world sooner?

Well, it *would* be incredible, if it weren't that the

family unit *is willed* by God as essential for His creation; as the way He wants us to grow up, and learn to love. Family life and honest work is what God intended for us, and has been sanctified by Jesus's presence. Other ways of living — cohabitation of unmarried couples, same-sex unions, and such like — are not what God intends for us: He has shown us clearly that marriage and family life, after the clear example of the Holy Family of Nazareth, are the way to try and live. None of our families will be perfect, of course, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that we *try to live* as Jesus has shown us ... and for the most part, He showed us that this means living and loving and working in the family. The family is hopefully where we have received love and have learnt how to love; and so it's the place we want to be to celebrate God's love for us, such as at Christmas, and to believe in that love, and live it out!

Many years ago, when he was on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Pope Paul VI gave a beautiful homily that I love to read and re-read each year at this time. He gave [this address in Nazareth](#) itself, at the basilica built over the

site believed to be that of the home of the Holy Family. I would like to quote a few paragraphs:

“The home of Nazareth is the *school* where we begin to understand the life of Jesus — the school of the Gospel. The first lesson we learn here is to look, to listen, to meditate and penetrate the meaning — at once so deep and so mysterious — of this very simple, very humble and very beautiful manifestation of the Son of God. Perhaps we learn, even imperceptibly, the lesson of imitation.

Here in this school, one learns why it is necessary to have a spiritual rule of life, if one wishes to follow the teaching of the Gospel and become a disciple of Christ. How gladly would I become a child again, and go to school once more in this humble and sublime school of Nazareth: close to Mary, I wish I could make a fresh start at learning the true science of life and the higher wisdom of divine truths. ...

First, then, a lesson of **silence**. May esteem for silence, that admirable and indispensable condition of mind, revive in us, besieged as we are by so many uplifted voices, the general noise and uproar, in our seething and over-sensitized modern life. May the silence of Nazareth teach us recollection, inwardness, the disposition to listen ...

the need for ... [a] personal inner life, the prayer which God alone sees in secret.

Next, there is a lesson on **family life**. May Nazareth teach us what family life is, its communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character. Let us learn from Nazareth that the formation received at home is gentle and irreplaceable. Let us learn the prime importance of the role of the family in the social order.

Finally, there is a lesson of **work**. Nazareth, home of ‘the carpenter’s son,’ in you I would choose to understand and proclaim the severe and redeeming law of human work; here I would restore the awareness of the nobility of work; and re-affirm that work cannot be an end in itself, but that its freedom and its excellence derive, over and above its economic worth, from the value of those for whose sake it is undertaken. And here at Nazareth, to conclude, I want to greet all the workers of the world, holding up to them their great pattern, their brother who is God. He is the prophet of all their just causes, Christ our Lord.”

(Nazareth, 5th Jan 1964)

Now, one may be somewhat *daunted* by that homily. Maybe you feel, well, my family is no great ‘school of love,’ or ‘school of the Gospel’ or in any way a real

imitation of the Holy Family; it just jogs along, it's quite ordinary and has its travails and its glaring flaws. Yes, true, of course, very likely. But that's not the point the Pope is making: he's not trying to make our families feel well-and-truly inferior to the beautiful model of the Holy Family. Just the opposite, he's asking us to value what we do have in our all-too-fallible families, the good that *is* done, and so to be encouraged. By that significant remembrance that Jesus spent *30 yrs in Nazareth* to sanctify the life of the family, might we have repeated recourse to Jesus, Mary & Joseph to bless the efforts of our family to be better a locus of love and a powerhouse of prayer, a place from which we are motivated to go to work, and a home to return to truly caring rest.

The Gospel passage today from Lk 2 refers us forward to that 40th day of Christmas (Presentation / Candlemas, Feb 2nd) but for today I would like to draw just one lesson, and that's the influence of the Holy Family on Simeon and Anna. Mary & Joseph are "*doing what the Law of the Lord required.*" They are following what the

Lord had pre-inscribed into the rituals of the people of Israel, and no more. They are not inventing from scratch this trip to the Temple. They are simply living a holy family life, and offering thanksgiving to God for this new-born son. The joy that is brought to Simeon and Anna in this event is of course extraordinary, and palpable. Simeon sings of his relief and his privilege in the *Nunc Dimittis* canticle, and Anna "*began to praise God; and spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.*" Mary & Joseph, in their faithful devotion to God — expressed in a special way in their faithful devotion to Jesus — manage to bring new members into the joy of Jesus's Holy Family: the family of Christ is already growing, in other words. How is our family growing? If our families — and our Chaplaincy family — is absolutely (no excuses!) centred on doing what Joseph and Mary did, making Jesus the very heart of our family, then the Christian family will grow: the joy of it will spill over, and others who are awaiting the coming of the Redeemer into their life, will see and know for sure that

here He is, and will want to join our 'holy family.' Let us call on the Holy Family of Nazareth to assist us in our daily, family, needs, the necessary, and God-given, focus of so much of our life ...

PRAYER AT THE CRIB

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me for ever, and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.



Loving Lord JESUS, born for us;
Blessed Mary, bearing the Son of God;
Holy St Joseph, caring for the Christ-child:

As I kneel before this crib, the first humble abode of JESUS on this earth, I ask you — the Holy Family — to look in kindness and blessing upon me, upon my family, and upon all whom I love and hold dear.

Lord JESUS: fill me with faith in You!

Holy Mary: help me to know, love and follow your Son!

Faithful St Joseph: assist me to care for my family!

Allow me never to place the material things of this world higher than my love for God. May I imitate the poverty that you knew on that Christmas night in Bethlehem, and for ever model my life on the pattern of GOD MADE MAN. Amen.