



Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Pastoral Message

Feast of the Holy Family

27th December 2020

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

We celebrate today the feast of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They are for us the model of family life. Each had their own unique place in God's plan of salvation. They teach us that our ordinary everyday lives lived out in the context of family life are not only a means of salvation for us but also a sign to the world of God's merciful love. At the same time, we are all aware of the great stresses and strains upon family life and the breakdown of many marriages, and we are painfully aware that for many, family life can be unhappy or that there are people who suffer loneliness because they have no family. In such a context, the Holy Family might seem distant from our own experience.

And yet the Holy Family is very real; they experienced worry and danger too. St Joseph struggled with the discovery that Mary was with child. The circumstances of the birth of Jesus were not the easiest and, upon returning to the land of Israel from seeking refuge in another country, the family had to move house out of fear and go to live in Nazareth. Mary was discomfited by the words of the angel Gabriel, and did not find their meaning plain. Even though Jesus is divine and Mary without sin, neither escaped suffering and the consequences of poverty. As Simeon foretells, a sword would pierce Our Lady's heart, and Our Lord would die on the cross. The Holy Family lived their lives in a world as full of uncertainty and fear as we do today.

I know how difficult this year has been for families; for all of us. Public health rules to prevent the spread of COVID have kept families apart, have prevented grandparents from hugging their grandchildren and have made family life far more difficult than it already is. For many of us our Christmas celebrations have been curtailed. In addition, our churches have had to remain closed for weeks at a time and we haven't been able to gather for Mass in our parish communities as we would wish. This year has been marked by 'waiting': waiting for better times, waiting for a vaccine, waiting for a return to 'normal'. Better days will arrive.

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At the same time, we remember that Jesus is the word made flesh who dwelt among us, and the Holy Family was where he first came to dwell. The Son of God came among us to share all the fears and disappointments of human existence; he shares our situation because he has lived through it himself. In the gospel today we heard how Mary and Joseph take him to the Temple, the place where humanity encountered divinity, where God entered into our world. So St Luke is telling us that now, in the child Jesus, we have the new temple, the place where God dwells with his people. We celebrate the Holy Family because the Lord Jesus dwells in our families too, not because our families are worthy or perfect, but because he loves us.

In the person of Jesus Christ, in this small child, whom Simeon holds in his hands, the whole of humanity and the whole of human history is connected. For in this child God enters into and transforms that history, so that all our lives, through this child, are united and seen in the light of eternity.

After the darkness and confusion of this past year, I pray that the light of Christ will shine anew in your families and that your hopes, like the hopes of Abraham, Sarah, Simeon and Anna, will be fulfilled.

With every good wishing and blessing to you all this Christmas time and in the year ahead.

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