

CHRISTMAS 1 THE HOLY FAMILY  
St David's Eucharist  
Yr C 2018

*'My grandmother is one of the people of whom I retain the strongest impressions in my childhood. She taught me the Lord's Prayer. The best that is in us seems to me to come from her Welsh mother. This is where our faces come from, the face that I have: the look, the grin and the brow. It is the Welsh in me that counts; this is what does the strange things, that writes the books, and drives me into the woods. Thank God for the Welsh in me, for the face and the humour and the silences.'*

*(Thomas Merton)*

Well the reference to the writing of books was the give-away. This is not me, though there is much here that I think would apply to me, no, this is Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer of the last century; Anglican, then Roman Catholic, then Cistercian monk and finally hermit, though one who was allowed to travel widely from time to time. Indeed he was on a speaking tour in the Far East when he was accidentally electrocuted by a faulty hotel lamp.

He was there partly because of his increasing interest in comparative faith, beginning to explore the similarities between different faith families.

Family is in fact my theme for this morning; personal ones and biblical ones.

We start with the Holy Family in the Gospel, with its story, unique to Luke, about Jesus' visit to Jerusalem with his parents who, assuming he's with the other members of their party (which must have been a large group for them not to have missed him earlier), suddenly realise he isn't with them.

It's of a piece with that other uniquely Lukan material which includes an earlier visit to the Temple, where Mary meets Simeon who tells her that 'a sword will pierce your soul', because of Jesus. Jesus is beginning already the teenage process of moving away from parental dependence to personal independence. He's asking questions and searching for answers that will satisfy his growing understanding of himself and who he is and what his life is meant to be. That said, he still remains with his family for another eighteen years. This is not teenage rebellion so much as an earnest of things to come.

The Jewish community of which Jesus was a part had, and still has, a very strong sense of family. It's there, you remember written into the Ten Commandments - the first four are about our relationship to God, then next in importance, number five, we hear, 'Honour your father and mother that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.'

I was particularly aware of this recently when we went for what in recent years has become an annual pilgrimage to London around Christmas to meet up with Ruth's Jewish cousins. The idea of a get-together came from the one who lives in Jerusalem, along with her rabbi husband. They are all descendants of one family living in Halle, near Dresden, in the 1930s. Dispersed by nazism, the various siblings made their way to different countries, two of them to England. The reunion brings first cousins and their descendants together, including one who came across in the kindertransport and who only became known to the rest of her family many years later.

At one point this year, as they were talking together around the table one said to the other, 'The moment I first met you I had a tremendous sense of family, I felt I knew you already.'

Here, then, was a real familiarity with someone who was, on the face of it, a complete stranger. You see the same dynamic sometimes in those *Who do you think you are?* Programmes, when, by tracing family trees, people discover a new branch of the family they never knew existed and meet for the first time.

I talked with the rabbi, one who like me had married into this family, and he was telling me about some talks he'd be giving in an upcoming conference about families in scripture and how he would be inviting people to think about their own families in the light of them. They're interesting. Here are a few.

Adam and Eve, a partnership of equals as the rabbis point out, Eve being created from Adam's side. But one that breaks down and is tested by the rupture with their primary relationship with God: 'What have you done?' It's the blame game - 'it wasn't me, it was her.' 'Well, the serpent told me it would be ok.'

Adam and Eve have children, a story we heard on St Stephen's Day, that feast of the first Christian martyr. It was about Cain and Abel, an offering of gifts, a deadly sibling rivalry, the first murder, a breaking of bonds.

Then Abraham and Isaac, the fire, the knife, the only child bound in sacrifice. It seems at first horrific, and so it is, but are children still, sometimes, the victims of their parents' ambitions or principles? How do we treat our children? Are they more important than Facebook?

Then the moving story of Ruth and Naomi, her mother-in-law; a story of family fidelity across boundaries, Naomi an Israelite and Ruth the Moabite, tribes often sworn enemies of each other. Here is the story of the foreigner who integrates thoroughly with her adopted people and country - indeed she becomes the ancestor of the great King David.

This is another OT story appointed to be read at this time of the Church's year. And it seems to be pointing towards the inclusion of those beyond the Jewish community, just as the gospel of Jesus will eventually spread beyond the first century Jewish community. Even within the pages of the NT Jesus seems to be pushing the boundaries outwards to include those normally excluded, a movement that accelerates with the apostles and Paul in particular, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus sometimes appears harsh even towards his family. At Cana, when they run out of wine and Mary asks him to do something about it. 'Why's that my problem?' he says. 'I've got other things to do.' Or when he's teaching a large group of people and his family comes to see him. You remember? 'Your mother and your brothers are waiting to see you.' 'Here,' he says gesturing towards his audience, 'Here are my mother, my sister my brothers.'

Jesus, the unconventional, unmarried man is actually quite subversive of the family when you look at it. He creates a substitute family by gathering a disparate, rag-bag of people around him. He shapes a whole new community.

Christianity is a universal faith. We believe that Jesus died to bring everyone closer to God and to each other. He breaks down the tribalism that exists between people of different backgrounds and cultures, he crosses boundaries and invites everyone to come to him. He is lifted up on the cross, St John tells us, so that he might draw everyone to himself.

In our own times we speak of the nuclear family, meaning parents and children and it's one of those words that has become restricted in its meaning. Families are no longer as large as they used to be in the West, we become separated from each other by distance as children move away for work and to make their own lives.

At Christmas the Holy Family on the cards seems to offer a perfect example of this nuclear family. But actually Jesus was one of a large number - he had other brothers and sisters, one of them leading the Church in Jerusalem after his Ascension. Even in today's gospel he was travelling with what was probably a large extended family group, which was why he wasn't initially missed.

The family is the foundation-stone of a stable society and children are its future, which is one powerful reason why the nurture and education of children are so important, as is the faithfulness of parents to each other in order to provide a safe and strong environment for them to grow and learn about love and forgiveness and renewal; a safe space to celebrate and laugh as well as to weep and to mourn.

The family is crucial to the survival of us all and it is under great strain at present, which is why we must as a Church do all we can to support it, whatever form it may take in our more diverse world - and perhaps especially when it breaks down so that it may have the chance to re-form afresh.

But Christian faith takes us further again, inexorably outwards towards others. In times when international agreements and organisations are discounted or in disarray, when our own relationship with our nearest neighbours in Europe is being disrupted and our nation riven by factionalism, we in the Christian community have a responsibility to demonstrate a broader perspective and a deeper truth: that we are called to live together as a human family, recognising our resemblance one to another, seeing our face and the face of Christ in the other person, wherever they come from and whoever they are.

Today the writer to the Colossians has given us the guidelines for becoming that kind of community and for bearing that kind of witness in the world. They are good words to take with us into the New Year:

... 'clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and... forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called in the one body. And be thankful.'