

THE HOLY FAMILY [A]

Ecclesiasticus 3: 2 - 6, 12 - 14

Colossians 3: 12 - 21

Matthew 2: 13 - 15, 19 - 23

In 1850, John Everett Millais, the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite artist, painted a picture called: "Christ In The House Of His Parents."

When the picture was first exhibited in the Royal Academy, these words from the Prophet Zechariah accompanied it: "If someone asks, 'What are these wounds on your body?' they will answer, 'The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.'" Zech. 13: 6

Those words of Zechariah speak prophetically of Christ's Crucifixion.

Jesus who, as John says at the beginning of his Gospel: "Came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognise him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him."

Jn. 1: 10 - 11

The painting shows Jesus, as an ordinary boy, in Joseph's carpenters shop, and Jesus has cut His finger.

The blood from the cut on his finger is dripping onto His foot, and His mother is comforting Him. It was so different from other paintings of Christ that Millais was viciously attacked by the press for showing the Holy Family as 'ordinary'.

Even the author, Charles Dickens, described Christ in the painting as 'a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-haired boy in a night-gown.'

The paintings very realism challenged the popular notion that Jesus should be regarded as somehow other-worldly, and semi-detached from the realities of life.

This, of course, meant that people could call themselves Christian, whilst perpetuating the inequalities that were rife in Victorian society.

And this mind-set is echoed in a verse - no longer sung these days for very good reasons - of that well-known Victorian hymn, All Things Bright And Beautiful: "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, he made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate." Cecil Frances Alexander

The artist, by placing Jesus in Joseph's carpentry shop, working with wood, and having spilt His blood in doing so, with it dripping from His hand onto His foot, was saying that how Jesus grew up prepared Him for the shedding of His blood for us on the wood of the Cross.

The Feast of The Holy Family is put here, right after Christmas, to reinforce once more the Christmas message that Jesus is a real person.

How often have you heard it said, or said it yourself, that someone really takes after their Mum and Dad? Quite often, I guess.

So if we're to take seriously our fundamental belief that the Word became flesh - became a human being - born at a particular time, in a particular place, into a particular human family; then I believe it follows that Jesus would have taken after His human parents.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Colossians, tells us: "To be clothed in compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience. [And] over all these clothes, put on love, the perfect bond."

Col.3: 12,14

He tells us to do this so that we can begin to take on the features of Jesus, because those are the qualities He displayed in His life.

And where did Jesus learn to be compassionate, generous, humble, gentle, patient and loving?

In His family: in His family, where He lived in the loving bond between Mary, His mother, and Joseph, His adoptive father.

I have a beautiful Austrian wood carving at home of the Holy Family.

As I was thinking about this sermon I looked at it to give me inspiration, and the way the figures are composed reminded me of the communion of love that exists in the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Family are there to draw us into the life of God because Jesus, the Word made flesh, is its very heartbeat.

We can see in Matthew's account of the birth and infancy of Jesus, the kind of man Joseph was. Similarly, in Luke's account we can see Mary's character brought into focus, and begin to appreciate the influence these two people must have had on Jesus.

In the Gospel today Joseph is shown as a man who sought out, and listened to, the Lord's will for the Holy Family.

He takes Jesus and Mary out of danger in Israel into the safety of Egypt, and only returns when it's safe to do so.

Matthew says that this fulfils the Old Testament prophecy of Hosea: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." Hos.11: 1

He does this to show the parallel between the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, and Israel's history. When Israel was an infant nation it went into Egypt, as Jesus did as a child.

Later, God through Moses, led Israel out of Egypt; as the Lord called Jesus and His family back to Israel from Egypt.

'Out of Egypt I have called my son:' the Lord working out our salvation in all of these events.

And Jesus lived out those hidden years of His childhood, and early manhood in Nazareth, where, as Scripture says: "He increased in wisdom and in years, and in favour with God and with people."

Lk.2: 52

Now, what can we learn from those hidden years of the Holy Family?

Well, they're not a 'normal' family, in the sense that no other family has had the Word made flesh as part of it.

But, both Mary and Joseph had Jesus as the centre of their lives, which is what we must all strive to do.

Whether we're married, single, widowed, childless, young or old; we belong to the family of the Church - the Body of Christ - which has Jesus at its very heart.

And so, in the 'Holy Family' of the Church, we can look to that other Holy Family to teach us to:

"Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in [our] hearts. For as members of one body [we] are called to live in peace. [And] let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill [our] lives. [So that] we [can give praise] to God with gratitude in [our] hearts." Col.3: 15-16