

## The Holy Family

“Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you.”

Matthew 2, 13-23

We're very much used to Christmas cards with reproductions from famous Renaissance painters who depict the nativity scene with hardly a thing out of place. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus all wear beatific countenances, with Mary and Jesus in the centre and Joseph pushed to one side. Even the animals are nicely groomed and there are certainly no droppings in sight. We've become as accustomed to this stereotype of the first Christmas as we have to our modern-day commercial Christmas scenes with their tinsel, coloured lights and canned carols broadcast through shopping malls.

However, the scene depicted in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is a far cry from how the great masters presented it. For Matthew, Joseph is the central character. He is a visionary and a man of courage and action who takes responsibility in his stride. He takes Mary as his wife, even though she is already pregnant, and when Jesus is born, he does not hesitate to set out for Egypt in order to protect the Child from a tyrant who will stop at nothing to remove any perceived threat to himself. Joseph and his new family take on the status of refugees.

The journey to Egypt was no walk in the park. Nor was it a weekend hiking expedition. It was a demanding and risky journey made by a family fleeing to safety, and quite uncertain about the reception they would receive in Egypt. (Maybe there were no immigration officials at the border to bar their entry!) It is not surprising that the Coptic community in modern Egypt has preserved its own stories and legends about the sojourn of the Holy Family among their people. Visitors to the Coptic church of St. Sergius in Cairo are shown a small crypt beneath the church which allegedly marks the site of where Joseph set up home for his family while he worked as a tradesman on the site of the nearby Roman fortress. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the persecuted Copts of Egypt, and boat people travelling to Christmas Island (what an irony!) seeking refugee status have a lot in common with Joseph and his family who sought safety in a foreign land.

It was a considerable time before the Holy Family got to settle anywhere. They were a family on the move, going from Bethlehem to Egypt, back to Judea and from there to Galilee where they finally settled in Nazareth. From other snippets that Matthew gives us, it was clear that they were at least part of a large extended family. In chapter 13 of his Gospel, Matthew makes reference to brothers and sisters of Jesus: “Where did this man get such wisdom and miraculous powers? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't Mary known to be his mother and James, Joseph, Simon and Judas his brothers? Aren't his sisters our neighbours? Where did he get all this?” (Matthew 13, 55-56) Whether we take this literally, or take the view that the people named are cousins of Jesus, is of little consequence. Jesus very clearly had lots of relatives whom all the locals knew about. He belonged to an ordinary family which had to deal with all the hassles that are part and parcel of family life.

The point of today's liturgy is just that: Jesus, like us, belonged to a very human family, the kind of family that had to pack up everything and move from place to place and start afresh each time. And we all know lots of families like that because so

many parents have jobs that demand frequent transfers - the armed forces, the police service, the Department of education and such like. There are other families, of course, that stay put while one or other parent has to work in another city or state. That kind of situation puts a whole lot of different pressures on family life.

Today's liturgy invites us to stop and reflect on the value of family and the significant part it has played in shaping the lives and values of most of us. The celebration of the Holy Family also points up the demands of parenthood. Parents accept the demands and responsibilities that go with nurturing, feeding, clothing and educating children. But they are also charged with shaping minds and hearts, and imparting values and attitudes. They achieve this as much by what they do as by what they say.

There is little doubt that Jesus would have learned much from the stories Joseph and Mary told him of the struggles and challenges they had to face in the weeks and months following his birth. Surely Jesus would have heard of the dilemma that confronted Joseph when he found that Mary was pregnant and knew that he had no part in it. And surely, Mary and Joseph would have told him of the challenges and frustrations of being refugees in Egypt. These are the challenges, dilemmas and quandaries that touched the day-to-day lives of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and all the other people who belonged to their extended family. And they are the stuff of the lives of all of us, for no family goes without its crises, disappointments, tears and tragedies. We come through because of large doses of understanding, tolerance, compassion, resilience and faith in God - the very same qualities demonstrated by all who belonged to the family of Jesus.

Today is also a reminder to us to pause and utter a prayer of thanks for all our family members who have contributed much towards shaping us into the people we have become. It's a time to be grateful for our parents who loved us into life, who cared for us through thick and thin, who picked us up when we were down, who walked with us through our failures and disappointments, who laughed and cried with us and who were just there when we needed them most. They're the unsung saints of our lives who brought to us the touch of ordinary holiness.