

Happy Family – Holy Family

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As a child, one of the games we used to play at Christmas was 'Happy Families'. Children today would not be fascinated with Mr Bun the baker, Mrs Field the farmer's wife, Master Soot, the sweep's son or Miss Bull the butcher's daughter. Such names conjure up a way of life which has long since disappeared. A happy family was made up of father, mother, son and daughter. We always played the game at Christmas because this was the family time. The ideal of a happy family was also portrayed in nativity scenes depicting a comfortable stable, centrally heated by cows and illuminated by a shining star. The visits of kings and shepherds just like the friends who called to bring me presents, added extra magic to our festivities.

Times have changed. Happy families have disappeared along with Mr Bun and Master Sweep. Powerful advertising now determines the 'must have' gift for children. Extravagant spending occurs before Christmas, debts mount, arguments flare. The very pressure to be a happy family at Christmas leaves us exhausted. Suicides are high. Loneliness becomes overwhelming. Such is the cultural diversity of relationships today that even defining what we mean by 'family' is not easy. Certainly there are fewer families like the Mr, Mrs, Master and Miss of my childhood days.

Although we can blame this on the advance of secularism and the pressure of consumerism, the Church, in its idealization of the Holy Family, has much to answer for. Mistletoe and tinsel portrayals of the first Christmas can hide the painful circumstances of Christ's birth.

The Bible story begins with a teenage pregnancy. Family problems arise when Mary's future husband considers breaking off the engagement. The stigma of illegitimacy would continue to hang over the family (Mk 6.3). These disturbing events occur just when the occupying foreign power orders a census forcing everyone to take to the roads crowding the towns and villages. Mary and Joseph are caught in this upheaval. When the first labour pains begin they are still on the street looking for somewhere to stay. A year later parents and child become refugees fleeing to avoid Herod's programme of ethnic cleansing.

The dark undercurrents of anxiety, fear, danger and homelessness run beneath the first Christmas. Little has changed. Families in Cockermonth contemplate their washed out homes and livelihood. The young grief stricken mother hears that her soldier husband has been killed

by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. The widower dreads his first Christmas alone. God's coming to earth in such painful circumstances as described above speaks of his continued identification with the lost, the lonely and the homeless of every age. Like a single candle of hope, God comes to 'disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight'.

This Biblical movement from Advent darkness through Christmas hope to Easter triumph reshapes the idea of family. Mary is told 'a sword will pierce your heart'. The painful reconstitution of family is not yet complete. She and Joseph struggle to understand their bewildering child (Luke 2, 41f). Joseph dies. Mary now a single parent has to bring up Jesus and his other brothers and sisters. A family crisis is triggered when Jesus, the chief breadwinner, abandons them to go off on a preaching tour. According to the family 'he is mad'. When Jesus is told that his mother, brothers and sisters have sought him out and are waiting outside his response must have hurt Mary. 'Who is my mother and my brothers?' Yet this explanation goes to the heart of what God's family mission is about. 'Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother' (Mk3.34). The myth of happy families has been demolished in the face of a new inclusive understanding of a 'holy family'.

When I was a minister in Hartcliffe, Bristol we had a middle aged gentleman attending church called Ernie. Ernie was mentally and physically impaired. He lived alone. He had an aged mother in London whom he seldom saw. One day he came to the manse with a letter. He often did this. He could not read. The letter had been forwarded through several addresses before reaching him. It informed him that his mother had died some weeks before. He heard the news in silence and then blurted out 'I've no family now. I've nobody'. Then he paused and added, 'That's not true, you're my family now'.

John in his Gospel records 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God'. A new world family has been inaugurated through the incarnation. It is not born of flesh and blood, or through the will of a husband but of God. We see it consummated on the cross when Jesus, pointing to John, says to his mother 'behold your son'. We hear it when he tells John 'behold your mother'. The seeds of a universal 'holy family' continue to be planted between the wood of the manger and the wood of the cross and will continue to the end of time.

'Jesus is our brother now

And God is all our own'