

When it comes to human happiness, it's hard to beat a *good* married and family life. It brings a love that can be relied on, no matter what. It brings the deep joy of simply *being with* those to whom we belong on so many levels. There is a strength to family bonds which both *gives* and *demand*s real support in the face of whatever life can bring. Family life is where we learn to give selflessly, to sacrifice, to put others first and to realise that there is greater joy in giving than in receiving. *None* of this comes easily. It requires discipline, proper order and the need to learn, too, that a "no" to one thing is often the best way to say a "yes" to something more important.

For all that married and family life can have its problems, and sometimes its tragedies and breakdowns, there's no one who *doesn't* want their family life to be happy and free of pain. The deep and lasting damage that married couples and family members can, alas, do to each other *is* so painful and so bitter precisely because our deepest instinct is that it should never be like that. It's like bereavement, in which the *very pain* of grief is a sign of the depth of the love which death has torn asunder.

When we look at the *Holy* Family, we can sometimes wonder how on earth it can have any real relevance to ourselves, especially if we have experienced marriage or family breakdown. It almost seems to rub our nose in our own sufferings or failures.

The Holy Family, though, is not the *perfect* family. Socially, Mary could have been stoned to death for her pre-marital pregnancy. Joseph himself was intent on ending their

betrothal. He thought to do it privately so as to spare Mary a violent and shameful death, probably because he still loved her deeply. And that's just it: Joseph must have felt deeply betrayed by Mary. Even when he accepted God's will to take her home as his wife, it's not difficult to imagine the bewilderment and frustration he must have experienced humanly speaking. He and Mary would share the same house, but never the same bed; the natural and beautiful gift of conjugal love would have no intimate sexual expression; he will have to work and suffer for a son that he could not really call his own and for a woman he could not love as any man loves his wife.

As if that weren't enough, under duress they have to leave Nazareth for a *short trip*, as Joseph thought, to Bethlehem. Once there, there is no roof over their head worth talking about; the child could not have been born at a more awkward time or in more awkward circumstances; they are gate-crashed by all sorts of weird strangers; the child's life is threatened with murder; they are forced to be refugees in Egypt for two years with all of the risks from bandits as well as the food, water, accommodation and financial insecurities involved. They *do* eventually return to Nazareth, but Joseph was probably worried sick about the state of his home and workshop and even if he would still be able to claim them as his own. Mary, too, will have shared in all these worries and uncertainties, and the baby will have picked up on both their anxiety. They both had faith in God, of course, but faith in God does not mean that we are sheltered from the uncertainties and challenges of daily life.

We hear nothing from the time Jesus was about two until he was twelve, when he gets lost in Jerusalem and his parents spend three anxious days looking for him. Both Mary and Joseph would be out of their minds with worry and then not a little put out when Jesus explains himself with an answer they don't understand. You can almost hear Joseph say, "Jesus, that's enough. Come back to Nazareth and do as your told." Then, probably at some point before Jesus leaves home to begin his ministry, Joseph will have died, never seeing or hearing anything of the great works and teachings of his foster son for whom he'd sacrificed so much, and maybe even wondering what his own life had been about at all. As for Mary, now husbandless, she has to endure all the misunderstanding and hostility that her Son will occasion, and see him tortured and murdered at a young age. The sword pierced her heart. In some sense, it had first pierced Joseph's.

This is not the portrait of a perfect family!

The problems that may exist in *our* families are probably very different from those of the Holy Family, although, who knows, similar on this or that point. They may even be worse or not as bad. But the Holy Family is not at all a distant, ideal of no relevance to us. The question is how, in the midst of our trials, we can even begin to be holy families. It comes down to this: obedience to God, the opening out of our married and family life *pro-actively* to the presence, the concern, the providence of God. It was not that God had failed the Holy Family as it went through such sufferings. It was that they went through those sufferings *while bringing them to God*,

opening them up to His grace, trusting in His power to see them through and even to strengthen them as a result.

Holy means consecrated to God, living or dwelling in God's sphere of influence and action. Marriage and the family are holy *by nature*, since they come from the hand of God. If there is any human situation in which God has a direct and immediate concern, it is especially in marriage and the family, since these are the crowning glory of his work of creation.

But He requires us to *recognise that*: to refer our marriages and families constantly to Him in prayer and surrender, especially when things are going wrong or breaking down. The old saying about the family that prays together, stays together, is not merely a pious platitude. It expresses the most basic attitude which any marriage or family needs: openness to God, referral to God of the whole of family life, in good times and in bad. Yes, social workers and psychologists and doctors, etc., have a role to play. Provided they don't try to take a marriage or family in a direction that is not pleasing to God, God Himself wants us to use all of the human resources that can help us when we are in trouble. But, at the end of the day, we are called to entrust marriage and the family to God, especially in times of doubt and darkness. They are His treasured and special possession and He will defend and support them with special love and care.

Through the Holy Family, let us today recommit and open up our marriages and families to God. It's the best Christmas and New Year gift we can give them. There's nothing like marriage and family because there's no-one like God.