

This feast that we celebrate this year the very day after Christmas seems a bit like the second act of one play or the second half of one game. However, the game is a blow-out, and the first act was so full of action, drama and significance that we have no energy left for a second act. Christmas can be like that - it can suck the life out of us and overwhelm us to the extent that we miss the purpose we celebrate Christmas.

Christmas is a celebration of human life, of our humanity, of our kind of lives, even though they are imperfect, and sometimes very imperfect. When Jesus took on flesh, became man, was conceived of the Holy Spirit, He entered human existence the same way each of us entered it, as an infant, helpless and very, very dependent.

The birth of Jesus, the act of Jesus taking on flesh, what we call the Incarnation, gave dignity to human life, the kind we all experience, but it also gave dignity to the way each of us experiences human life, **as members of a family**. Families come in all shapes and sizes. Whether it's a child being raised by a single mom (or Dad), a family of 12 children seemingly loving and cohesive, or an elderly parent being cared for by an adult child, they are all families.

The emphasis today would seem to exclude the single persons among us and to a certain extent, the widowed, but it does not. As children all of us had, or have, experience of family even if it's bad experience.

"Family" is the way Jesus first learned to experience human life, also. It's one of many things we share with Jesus, of which there are far more than we usually

bother to contemplate. And, interestingly, even though Jesus may have been born **IN** a stable, He was not born **INTO** a stable and comfortable family environment. Mary was young and inexperienced as a mother; Joseph was inexperienced as a father, and he had the additional burden of placing his trust in God in defiance of his society's norms as a husband.

Their situation was dire. They were poor and homeless, they were about to be uprooted from their native land to travel as refugees to Egypt; there was a mortal threat from the government that endangered the child instead of offering protection.

Joseph is a model for us of trusting God and doing his duty against significant opposition, in difficult circumstances. In many ways Joseph, the patron saint of our parish, is the ideal father. He did the best that he could do. He used his talents wisely. He trusted God. He was a man of faith. He cared for and led his family.

For those of you who would like to read more about the scriptural relevance of the birth and early life of Jesus I suggest you read *The Birth of the Messiah* by Fr. Raymond E. Brown. It has 750 pages. To understand the theology of this story and of the entire faith we profess, we must study scripture in greater depth. Study of Sacred Scripture helps us connect the experience of Jesus to the experience of the Jewish people and helps us understand that Jesus is the savior, the Messiah promised by God, the fulfillment of the scriptures.

Today however we concern ourselves with a portion of the words of St. Paul to the Colossians and of the Gospel of Matthew looking for the meaning for us of the actions of Joseph in response to the angel of the Lord which appeared to him in a dream.

Paul gives us a list of virtues to pray for, and to practice, so that family life can be uplifting, and wholesome, maybe tolerable is the best we can hope for on certain days, yielding love and the spirit of God. Paul gives us a code of family life, a guide for the successful operation of a household, specifying the duties of each member: husband, wife, and the young children as well as the grown children. We hear these words and know they are true, but we are often irritated by the terminology. Who wants to be subordinate? If we allow the meaning and intent of these words to sink in we realize the recipe is balanced and consistent with the words of Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus gave Himself for us, each one of us.

Paul said the same thing. Paul said that the family unit is so important that we have to sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of the family, for the greater good. Fathers, mothers and children are all called to sacrifice their personal needs and wants for the benefit of the family.

The roles and the exact duties have been rearranged and modified over time, such that Mom can be the breadwinner, or, in most cases, a necessary part of the financial stability of the family unit. That means also that Dad has additional responsibilities, never contemplated at the time of Jesus, but adaptations of the role of husband fitting the circumstances in which we live.

If Joseph were a father in this age he would know the meaning of terms like afterschool care, carpooling, and music lessons. He would know how to make lunches and reheat leftovers in a microwave. He would not be surprised that Mary would ask him to pick up milk on the way home. He would be able to operate a washing machine and load a dishwasher.

Even though we are not always holy, and Lord knows our siblings and parents can be seriously deficient in holiness at times, we are members of holy families. Family life has a subtle way of teaching us to love God because we learn to love our brothers and sisters, our mother and fathers, our step mothers and step fathers, all of whom are members of the family in which we find ourselves. We didn't choose these other family members. It might be God's sense of humor that we have been placed together. Regardless, this is who we are and it's where we get our start. It's usually where we end up, although the individual members change over time. It is in the family that we experience love the first time in our lives.

Family life is holy because it teaches us love. Love is **of God**. Love naturally leads us **to God** because it first comes **from Him**. That seems like a lot of prepositions, but I think we can agree that love comes from God and that which is of God naturally leads us back to God.

Another thing that St. Paul said is to be thankful. When we appreciate what we have and who we are, it is easier to experience the love of God in our lives, because we can see Christ in each other.

How we DO measure up.

We don't make our families holy on our own, or simply by our actions, however noble and generous they may be. Family life teaches us that we need other people and especially that we need God. God enriches our experience of family life through His grace, His mercy, and His forgiveness - all of which are components of His love for us.

When we let go of our own willfulness, when we open our hands, our clenched fists that hold on to our neediness and willfulness, when we let go of those things that stand in our way of reconciliation, joy and peace, we open our hands to God's love and grace. God's generous grace which is freely offered. In that way we open ourselves to the holiness God sends our way, to enable us to love one another.