

Holy Family (C)

29th December 2024

'The desire to transmit Life'

1Sam 1: Hannah gives birth to Samuel.

Ps 83:

1Jn 3: *The Father ... letting us be called God's children*

Lk 2: 41–52: the finding in the Temple

I know that — for many of you, at least — you didn't have the chance of family company for Christmas Day, being far from your homes here in London. I am lucky to say that I did manage to get home to my family, for a couple of days. But sad to say, this year, I didn't give a great performance in the Christmas-evening quiz-game against the rest of my family, and managed to come 2nd-last! Families are never perfect: families can frustrate us and have tensions, but still, they can bring out the very best in us. The building block of society, given us by God, is the family, founded on the marriage of a man & a woman committed in a life-long union of love & service, bringing into the world in a stable loving environment the children which are conceived naturally of the physical loving of that married couple. This is not just a *traditional family* in the sense that it is old-fashioned, but indeed what is right & natural for mankind, for the stable upbringing of children, and the

healthy moral sense of society. It makes sense, and it's normal, because it's the way God intended it: Creation is made this way. *Jesus Himself hallowed the union of marriage, & family life*, by His very presence in the Holy Family, and 30 years of life & work within the home and trade of Joseph. This is no mere accident of history, implying that all sorts of other lifestyles would be equally valid. No, God created mankind in the two sexes precisely to form that beautiful human bond of marriage and family. As Catholics, we are duty bound in our faith to defend marriage & family life, and to fend off all the recent assaults on it as inappropriate and unhealthy for individuals, especially children. No family is perfect, of course, or can live up in every detail to the ideal, yet we support as the Church, as parishes and as individuals, the families that we have, even if they are broken in some way, or riven by bereavements and difficulties, even addictions and tragedies. Government too, has a moral obligation to be supporting our families, helping that unit of the family be society's sacred cell, and not undermining it.

The Sacred Scriptures are filled with families — beginning with Adam and Eve and their sons; and running through the great family and tribe of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob and his 12 sons; and the kingly line of David. Some biblical families are more stable and effective and God-loving than others; some are miraculous and unexpected, and yet each allow God to unfold His plan of care for the world-wide family of humanity. Here today, for the Feast of the Holy Family, we have the OT family of Elkanah, Hannah & Samuel given us in the 1st Reading. It's a family with no expectation of a child, but with deep faith and devotion to God, expressed in the unstinting prayer of Hannah, and the desire of Elkanah to give thanks to God at the Temple, and of Hannah subsequently to offer her son in the Lord's holy service. Families like that, Scripture teaches us, bring many blessings, way beyond the confines of the individual family unit.

The Holy Family itself — Mary, Joseph & the Lord Jesus — is presented to us in the Gospel today in that moment of crisis, the loss of a 12-yr-old in Jerusalem, and

the Finding in the Temple. It's a reminder that, though we have just celebrated the birth of Jesus that "Silent Night," "Once in Royal David's City," the Holy Family faced, as any family does, its stresses and anxieties. The Gospel describes without diminution the fear that Mary & Joseph had, in their care of the Christ child in this moment of confusion and loss. It reinforces, too, the real *humanity* of Jesus, true God and true man — His divinity, manifest in His answering, and teaching, the Doctors of the Law in the Temple, is one with His humanity, manifest in subjecting Himself in obedience to Joseph & Mary in Nazareth. Our families, as Jesus's model family, should inhabit consciously both the world of the home and the world of the Temple — that is, the domestic and the sacred. Please God, whatever the religious life of our families is like, we can help lead it into greater devotion. "*Did you not know that I must be in My Father's house?*" says Jesus. We, too, must stay often "in our Father's house," in prayer, and so provide that *holy heart* to family life that may be in need of much re-energizing. Perhaps, against all your

expectations, you have come to university and now find yourself the most devout of all your family! Don't slip into a *pride* at that, but thank God that He has led you home to your Father's house, and pray that the rest of your family may follow you into finding Jesus there too. Stand strong, especially if your family, or friends back at home, make life difficult for you, or taunt or tease you for the depth of your faith and devotion. We would each want our family to be a 'holy family,' where Jesus takes centre-stage. Take inspiration from the Holy Family, and seek the prayers of Mary & Joseph as you do your utmost to contribute to — or lead — your family's holiness. This is not beyond you; it is asked of you; don't shy away from it. Don't go on life's journey and find that you've left Jesus behind and decide that it's not worth going back! — No, it's *imperative* that you go back and find Him, and re-centre your family life on Him. Even the least-religious member of your family, whoever that may be: be a witness to him or her, hold them close in prayer to Jesus, lead them back to find Him, answering all life's questions thrown at Him.

I noted, both in my homily for the Carol Service the other week, and in that of Christmas Day, that we are now entering a Holy Year, 2025 – one of the regular sequence of jubilee years in the Church's life since 1300AD. Pope Francis initiated it in the night of Christmas Eve, at St Peter's, and now in the dioceses of the whole Catholic Church, that Holy Year is begun with ceremonies in their cathedrals today: Cardinal Vincent does so at Westminster this Sunday at 12 noon. The papal Bull which announces and accompanies the Holy Year 2025 — and which elaborates on its theme of *hope* — is entitled *Spes Non Confundit* / “Hope does not disappoint.” I was intrigued when I read in that document of the various settings in which Pope Francis invited us strongly to practise Christian Hope in this jubilee year. All of them important — especially to strive for hope in settings of warfare, and poverty, and environmental degradation — yet the more surprising addition, I thought, was in para. 9, in which the Pope addresses the question of marriage and family, very relevant to today's 1st Sunday of the Holy Year, feast of the

Holy Family. Let me quote to you in its entirety this paragraph of *Spes Non Confundit*. As we listen to it, let's allow the Pope to speak his words directly to our souls, so that we take to heart his advice and desire for our own family life, one day — the new families of our own we might well hope for, and have:

9. Looking to the future with hope also entails having enthusiasm for life and a readiness to share it. Sadly, in many situations this is lacking. A first effect of this is the *loss of the desire to transmit life*. A number of countries are experiencing an alarming *decline in the birth rate* as a result of today's frenetic pace, fears about the future, the lack of job security and adequate social policies, and social models whose agenda is dictated by the quest for profit rather than concern for relationships. In certain quarters, the tendency "to blame population growth, instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the [real] issues."

Openness to life and responsible parenthood is the design that the Creator has implanted in the hearts and bodies of men and women, a mission that the Lord has entrusted to spouses and to their love. It is urgent that responsible legislation on the part of states be accompanied by the firm support of communities of believers and the entire civil community in all its components. For *the desire of young people to give birth to new sons and daughters* as a sign of the fruitfulness of their love ensures a future for every society. This is a matter of hope: it is born of hope and it generates hope.

Consequently, the Christian community should be at the forefront in pointing out the need for a *social covenant to support and foster hope*, one that is inclusive and not ideological, working for a future filled with the laughter of babies and children, in order to fill the empty cradles in so many parts of our world. All of us, however,

need to recover the joy of living, since men and women, created in the image and likeness of God, cannot rest content with getting along one day at a time, settling for the here and now and seeking fulfilment in material realities alone. This leads to a narrow individualism and the loss of hope; it gives rise to a sadness that lodges in the heart and brings forth fruits of discontent and intolerance.

Yes, then, let us be beacons of hope and life, and for many of us that will mean bringing forth new life in the context of Christian marriage and Christian families. The Pope does not mince his words: he wants us to have that "desire to transmit life," in accordance with our vocation. For some of us, in Holy Orders, that transmission of life will be in preaching the Gospel, and giving spiritual life through faith and the Sacraments; but for many others of you it will be in first co-operating with God — pro-creating with Him — in generating those new little human lives to whom He can bestow His blessed gifts of life, spiritual life, eternal life. Take heart, this day (this Holy Family feast day), that you too can form a *holy family*, and make that your prayer today to Mary & Joseph and the infant Lord. Pray for your home family; and pray for the family that one day you will have: have that "desire to transmit life" that comes in abundance from Him.