

## First Sunday after Christmas – 2018

This morning's gospel passage takes me back to 2001, we travelled to England to visit family. As usual we made a number of trips to London and on one of them we went to St Paul's Cathedral. The children were keen to go up to the whispering gallery and then on up through the dome to the highest point; all very exciting. It's August, the cathedral is crowded with tourists and Jemma becomes separated from us – she was ten years old. At the bottom of the stairs up to the dome we wait, becoming more and more concerned. Eventually I decide to go up and there was Jemma hand in hand with a French tourist. 'Is this your Father' he said in a rather accusatory Gallic tone, as only the French could do! It rather came across to my Anglo ears as 'is this the idiot who has let you run around a vast crowded cathedral on your own!' Fortunately Jemma said, rather sheepishly, 'yes it is!' I don't know whether she was sheepish because of my barely disguised anger or because she was having to admit to the Frenchman that this idiot was her Father!

In some parts of the western Church, of which we are a part, there is a significant emphasis placed on the idea of the 'Holy Family.' Indeed Catholics today celebrate the feast of the Holy Family and it is for many an opportunity to consider the place of the family within wider society. But as important as family is, we need to be wary because quite clearly Jesus' understanding of family was not the rather cosy nuclear family - Mum, Dad and 2.5 children that is sometimes held up as the ideal. Indeed in Jesus' day family was probably quite a different idea, and is, as we know, constantly undergoing revision. In today's gospel Luke has the twelve year old Jesus talking at cross purposes to his parents when they eventually track him down in the temple. 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them.

We might be wondering why we have suddenly made a leap of twelve years from last Tuesday. It is because today's gospel tells us in a rather homely way what the tricky Christmas texts were telling us theologically. On Christmas morning we heard that statement from John which reverberates around the Church 'and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' The letter to the Hebrews tells us that God has been always been communicating with humanity but has done so now through a Son. Christmas then is all about relationship, but the relationships we are called to are more than just family in the sense of

Mum and Dad and the kids. Jesus today reminds us that family is much more and he says much the same later in the gospels in different contexts. It strikes us as harsh but Jesus is uncompromising in this message which ultimately is what Church is all about. The Word made flesh is God's son, the Word requires of us a response and that response is to be at one with the son, to be family.

The hymn that we (we will open the 10.00am liturgy) opened this morning's worship helps us to get this connection between what it is to be family in every sense of that word. The first two lines verses four and five speak of the Son as the Word the creative force through whom everything exists and then in the third and fourth lines we find this young man, obedient, dependent, a son. And thereby hangs something of the difficulty that many of us experience in our relationships – horizontal and vertical that of dependence and inter dependence.

If I have a hope for this coming year it is that we will increasingly understand our dependence upon God and each other. We are told that 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' Once again Jesus at his uncompromising best! This means rediscovering the dependence that is so much at the heart of our faith in God. I hope that this year ahead of us we can rediscover our capacity to learn and receive with joy and excitement. When we rediscover our dependence on God and on each other we will more readily understand that others too are dependent and that being Church, being family, is all about embracing this fact.

The Church must run counter to the prevailing world view that those of value are those who are independent, a contributor to society, a tax payer and consumer. I wanted to read again the entire passage we heard this morning from Paul's letter to the Colossians. I won't but let's just be reminded of what he writes....*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* This is dependence and inter dependence writ large.

Today we celebrate what it is truly is to be the Holy Family. It is to proclaim that we are all indeed children of God. God's gift at Christmas is the gift of relationship; a relationship with God the Father. To receive the gift is to let go of our fear of dependence and to open our hearts to be fed, enlarged and transformed. Amen.