

## FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY 2004

I seem to recall in previous years bemoaning the way in which the commercial world wants to sweep Christmas out of the way once the shops close on Christmas Eve and to turn our minds (or else our pockets) to the next commercial goal. Just as in our Christmas liturgy we are beginning to celebrate and to savour the birth of Jesus, we are being urged to put all of that behind us and to move on.

Well, this year I have to confess to a similar urge to move on in our own Religious Education Centre for the Diocese. Last Tuesday I was in the Offices as usual tying up loose ends at the end of another term. I noticed one of the secretaries delving into one or two books of prayers and liturgies – not for Advent or Christmas – unfortunately they were for Lent!

As she quite rightly said when the Offices re-open on January 4<sup>th</sup> we have to be geared up for the courses being offered in January and with Easter being so early next year, she needs to have some Lenten material ready!

*“Let the message of Christmas in all its richness, find a home in you.”*

St. Paul in our Second Reading giving us some timely advice. The message that we celebrate at this time **is** very rich and like anything that is rich it needs to be digested in small doses, slowly. It needs to be savoured – yesterday we had the Gospel of Jesus’ birth – today we’ve skipped past even the visit of the Magi to the Flight into Egypt. It’s all a bit too quick.

There’s a constant observation, usually in the form of a moan, at how quickly things seem to come round these days. This is not just a complaint of old, or even middle age, it is also connected with the pace at which people live their lives today – always rushing from one thing to the next with hardly a moment to spare for each other.

Perhaps as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family we might just take a bit of time out – both to savour the story that we’ll celebrate at this time – **in all** its richness. And to give God thanks for the family and friends around us – for their love which mirrors God’s own love for us.

## THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY 2007

If, as St. Matthew suggests before Jesus’ birth, that the child born should be known as Emmanuel - God-with-us - then there is nowhere where this Jesus – the Word made Flesh – can be absent from our experience as human persons. Certainly he is a member of a close, loving family. It is easy enough to see God’s goodness and God’s grace at work, present in situations where love is so obviously at work.

But Jesus also belonged to a family that knew hatred and suffered from the effects of a paranoid dictator who resorted to violence against his subjects at the drop of a hat. He knew danger. Jesus witnessed, experienced, and was a victim of the best and the worst that can happen in family life. Jesus **is** Emmanuel, God-with-us, and is no stranger both to love and to hatred at work in our world. This is why I chose to include in the reading of the Gospel, 3 verses missed out in the middle of the passage offered to us today – the verses

dealing with the deaths of what we usually refer to as the Holy Innocents and whose feast we keep every year between Christmas and New Year.

Jesus was born in a country ruled over by a brutal dictator – a paranoid who, like most dictators, was always fearful, looking over his shoulder, in case someone was preparing to bump him off. He had his wife and members of his family put to death. He had innocent children put to death in case **a baby** should take over his rule. As he lay dying he had some of the citizens of Jericho killed just to make sure that there would be people crying at his funeral – such was his evil.

In face of this Jesus and his family became – like so many even today – homeless refugees, seeking safety in a foreign land. Even when they were able to return, it was not to their home, but had to make their home elsewhere in a safer area of their own land.

Jesus knew the desperation of the family life of many people. He also knew the great love that many also experienced in family life. In other words Jesus knew the full reality of our human life – its high points and its low points.

From this moment on in Matthew's Gospel the shadow of the Cross is never far away. This is something alluded to in many of the carols we sing at this time of year – the symbolism of the red berry of the holly pointing to the blood he will shed for us. The third of the gifts of the Magi – Myrrh, a symbol of suffering. The Cross lends to our redemption, our hope of new life.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus – the love of his family, we also remember those who live in situations where love seems to be absent and renew our hope in the One whose coming – whose life, death and resurrection – offers hope of salvation.