

**Pastoral Letter to be read at all Masses in the Archdiocese of Liverpool
on the Feast of the Holy Family 26th December 2021**

Dear Friends,

The pandemic has brought the family into prominence in an unexpected way. I believe the family will never be seen in quite the same way again. The current variant of the coronavirus has made it difficult for families to meet up over the Christmas period for the second year running. There are many restrictions preventing families getting together, and hospitals and care homes have had to restrict visiting patients and residents. The pain of separation at Christmastime is heart breaking for many families.

The family is our source of life and growth and as such is holy. It is the family that is God's partner in the act of creation, and this is apparent when a new child is born, and the parents experience a very real sense of wonder. In this sense Mary and Joseph are no different from parents today. They wanted to protect Jesus from an early death and were prepared to become refugees in Egypt to provide the safest start in life for him, not returning to Nazareth until the danger had subsided. Some years later Mary and Joseph were on Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem when they lost Jesus amongst the crowds, they had assumed he was with their relations and friends. The horror they must have experienced at this time strikes the heart of every parent and carer. Their child is the most precious gift that they have ever received.

The current refugee crisis which has literally come to our shores as dead bodies and people in rubber boats are washed up on our beaches has shocked us all. We must not describe this in ways which put this tragedy at arm's length. It may be caused by wars or economic collapse elsewhere in the world, but we cannot fail to be moved by the human tragedy which presents itself, as children die, and families are split up. There is much we can and should do to welcome the stranger, and not push them back into the sea.

I believe that over the last years the value of family has been rediscovered and is no longer taken for granted. But this is not simply a secular notion. As Christians we need to find again the place of Jesus at the heart of our families. If we do so through simple family prayers like grace before meals and parents' blessing their children before bedtime we will be surprised by the change in our attitudes. We will find the Christ-child born in a stable and laid in the manger, we will discover Jesus the refugee escaping danger in fear of losing his life, and Jesus the lost child breaking his parents' heart as he grows and goes about his father's business.

The Feast of the Holy Family is a reminder of the importance to us of family life. The gospel story of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple gives us a glimpse into the family life of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. In losing him Joseph and Mary experienced the anxiety which is often shared by many parents when their children go their own way. Yet in Jesus' act of teaching the doctors in the Temple we begin to understand Jesus' identity and relationship with his heavenly Father. Furthermore, Jesus healed the pain and misunderstanding of his disappearance, not by more explanation, but by returning with them to Nazareth. Through the sacramental life of the Church, we can be sure that Jesus dwells with us too. For families, the sacrament of Matrimony celebrates this special grace of Christ's presence, not just at the wedding ceremony itself, but throughout the marriage as a constant source of help and support. He gives them strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ'. (Eph. 5:21) Many Christian couples, and others, know this to be true from their own experience.

But in our times, I am also aware that families take many different forms and the attachments that each one of us has to others whether they are relatives or not are often signs of God's love. The single mother bringing up her children on her own shows a particular kind of sacrifice which not only deserves our admiration and support but is a clear sign of God's love for us all. Single people with no children, like myself, form family with relatives, close friends and loved ones. In fact, the gift of family is for everyone. Let's cherish it and see it for what it is: a true gift from God in which we discover his love made visible for us, Jesus Christ.

May the new year ahead be a time of unity, peace and health, and may the Lord bless you and your families.

**Most Reverend Malcolm McMahon OP
Archbishop of Liverpool**