

Pastoral Letter Feast of the Holy Family December 31st 2023

Dear friends, the feast of the Holy Family is an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of family in our lives.

Many of us are enjoying the company of our families in this Christmas season, but for others, the idea of belonging to a family is quite distant.

Circumstances can leave us without immediate family, and that can be a lonely experience. The wars and conflicts throughout the world lead to families breaking up and being separated from each other.

Some families do not always survive the pressures of modern life, and there is much relationship breakdown around us.

Nowadays, families come in different shapes and sizes, but at their heart is a common desire to build a mutual relationship based on love and respect.

Jesus' own family in several ways did not meet the expectations of what was considered to be a model family.

Mary's pregnancy out of wedlock disturbed Joseph greatly, and he offered to release Mary from her betrothal and Jesus was an only child which would have been rare in those days.

But there was a wider family, at least on Mary's side. There was her cousin Elizabeth, to whom she went for support during her pregnancy. And Mary, Joseph and Jesus also knew what it was like to leave their own country and live as refugees in Egypt until another ruler was on the throne in Israel.

But at the heart of Jesus' family was the love of God made visible for us in Jesus himself. The church celebrates this relatively modern feast, it's only about 100 years old, to help modern Christians remain faithful to God and each other in unstable times.

Jesus gives us another way of being family beyond our natural family. Our Jewish forebearers celebrate the weekly Sabbath and the annual Passover in their homes, and the synagogue plays an important part in their lives.

But the home possibly plays an even more important part. When Jesus celebrated the Passover the night before he died, he did so with his new family, the community of his disciples in a higher room.

This new family, the family of the church, is our family too. Or, more accurately, Jesus's family. And we are very much part of it.

Today's feasts suggest to me two things we could do in the new year. We could try some traditional prayerful practises which are based in our homes, like carols before the crib, before we put it back in its box. Grace before meals, the rosary or a birthday blessing.

These prayers are maybe the glue which hold our families together. A second, more challenging thing to do is to open our homes to others who do not have a family for a meal.

Many of you have gone further than this and given your spare room to a refugee or a homeless person, and this can be a big sacrifice.

But there are many other ways in which we can reach out and form new friendships and communities as a result of your reflection on the meaning of family to you.

Whatever we do or resolve to do, let us give thanks to God for his goodness to us all.

God bless you all.

Archbishop Malcolm McMahon OP, Archbishop of Liverpool