

The Christian Family

Sunday After Christmas

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This Sunday, the first after Christmas is set aside for the Holy Family as on this day, we take as our Gospel reading one of the accounts of Jesus Childhood. Scripture is quite silent on his childhood recording one or two incidents only and although the apocryphal writers have attempted to fill in the gaps, they tend only to inform us of their own understanding of the boy Jesus rather than anything useful about Jesus growing up.

This focus on the Holy Family tends to bring the focus onto our own family. It is worthwhile noting, that what made this family holy was the presence of Jesus in it and indeed any family which acknowledges Jesus presence can itself be considered Holy as well.

This should cause us to reflect of the place of Jesus in our family life. Is he part of the equation of daily living or just an added extra for Sundays and other special days like Christmas and Easter? How do we know anyway? Is there a special test we can do?

This would be nice. To be able to answer a set of questions or to meet a set of particular criteria and then we could say yes or no. You know score 10 points for daily Grace, 15 for family Bible study, 20 for church and Sunday School and if you get a hundred or more you are in etc etc.

But this presupposes that faith is about the things we do. Yes it is true that with young children, we can give to them faith building habits as they grow up. Habits such as Grace, prayer and bible reading will build faith in a young person as well as an older one, but they are not faith in itself. We can teach them to do things that will help them on their faith journey but we cannot give them faith. As Billy Graham put it, going to church makes you no more a Christian, than going to a garage makes you a car.

Yet as a church we tend to concentrate on these externals because they are easy to do, to quantify and they are demonstrable actions that we can sit back and safe with. We like to run programmes like Sunday School or Youth Group or Bible studies. This is my fundamental objection to courses such as Alpha for not only do they presuppose that faith is taught (rather than caught) but I believe that many churches run same, so they can salve their conscience that they are doing evangelism. You know something that we can point to and say look at what we are doing.

But we have it all wrong for evangelism is about who we are. If I was to ask you what it is that you learnt in Sunday School or Youth Group most would be hard pressed to tell me. If there is anything that you can remember it will be who taught you or who was the leader. This will be in either a positive or negative light. This tells us that faith is caught from others. And so it is in the family as well.

Many children in Christian homes rebel, not because they are evil, but because faith is enforced rather than experienced. Faith is seen as a set of rules to be obey and

standards to be achieved and not as a dynamic and living relationship with God. It is easy for me to tell you what to believe, but to show you faith in action, that is hard.

And yet unless I put my beliefs into practice, how will you know to do the same? As parents and grandparents, we are called to demonstrate faith, and to create the safe environment for our children to learn to put their trust in God as well. There are no rules or manuals as to how to do this, but it begins as always with our own relationship with our heavenly father.

I know that this is a challenge in store for us as a family as our children move to the point of independence. In my own journey but I have at least seen seeming saints fall away and sinners take up the challenge of the cross and so I will not predict outcomes. I believe that we put much store in young children's faith outcomes, without the full understanding that faith is a journey and not an event. This was brought home to me a number of years ago when I was surprised to find one of my more difficult Sunday School students was now active some twenty years later in their local church in Melbourne

As I look around, I am conscious that for many of you, this has been a struggle and collectively you have a range of experience from seeming success to children who have gone their own way and left the church behind them. Although this is in itself a very simplistic approach to the world, for we do not really know where God is at work in anyone's life. It is often for our own comfort that we want to know of our children's ultimate position, yet faith demands that we place this in the hands of God.

We have only the privilege of planting the seeds of faith and equipping them with the tools by which to discover faith, and as parents and grandparents and godparents, we can do more than to hold them up before God and pray that he will be active in their lives. For some of our children the journey will be hard, but the experiences will make them who God wants them to be and equip them for ministry in the place God puts them. Looking back, the dark times as well as the joyous times in my own life have helped me reach out to others that God has brought to me.

So perhaps I can be of little help, other than to free you from the expectations of others. Those who have had more than one child will know that the essential differences between them, mean that for each child something different may be appropriate. So do not look for a recipe to bring children to faith, but be open to all ideas and weigh them up concerning your own children and if you think they will work, then try them.

But first and foremost, work on your own faith. Ask yourself, is the hand of God in evidence in my life? Am I living with a dynamic relationship with Jesus, with a visible faith in my everyday life?

And what goes for the family, can be applied to the community as well. As well live out our faith, we will see others drawn in. Believe me, that the world is watching us, not to condemn, but just in case we may have the truth. Let us challenge the onlooker to believe that we have something worthwhile.

AMEN