

**HOLY FAMILY HOMILY ESSENDON 2020**  
**Lk 2.22-40      Gen 15.1-6, 21.1-3      Col 3.12-21**

It's just a little anticlimactic after Christmas to be back again so soon to celebrate the Feast of Holy Family. Yet, Christmas is a time where we do focus on family life and families gathering in the broader community as well as in the sacred scene of celebrating Christmas Mass together, and doing the traditional Christmas things we are accustomed to.

It is, however, a good time to reflect on, and appreciate the importance of our families for each of us, with all of the complications that can come with that, as time goes by, our children grow up, finding their own partners, and bringing grandchildren into the scene as well.

Over the last 35 years or so, having met thousands of people whose marriages have ended, and then seeking freedom to remarry or at least be psychologically, emotionally and spiritually free from a prior relationship, and having judged annulment cases over all of that time, marriage and family life are not to be idealized, but seen as positive and essential elements of life for most people, seeking partnership and companionship in life, as well as children together.

The hope is that commitment to a loving relationship, entered with all good intentions, can be sustained, but this is not always possible, for many different reasons, psychological, emotional and circumstantial. I've often enough stated that there is nothing sacred about a dysfunctional relationship, particularly where there is physical or psychological abuse.

In our Catholic tradition, we define marriage as a sacrament between the baptized, but no-one is bound to the impossible, and every person has the right to find peace and happiness in life, free of such oppression, so let's not be judgmental when things can't be worked out to resolve matters together.

Christmas can be a very trying, anxious and sad time for those whose relationships have not worked out as well as hoped, where there are tensions in families for whatever reasons of personalities, attitudes or behaviour and where there has been sadness and loss, with enduring grief, with loved ones no longer with us. 2020 has been a particularly difficult year from the latter point of view, where the coronavirus crisis has prevented families from being together, with the sick or dying, and only 10 mourners permitted to be physically present at funerals. It has not been an easy time all around.

Sometimes the pressures can bring out the best in us, but also the worst, when we have difficulty coping with it all.

The idyllic model here that Paul paints a picture of in today's second reading is all very well, and highly questionable. I often use it at Baptisms, to point out that he was wrong in instructing wives to be obedient to their husbands, and that equal partnership is what it is all about, compromise, communication and working on a loving relationship, in order to grow together, and not taking each other for granted. And as for raising children, it's not simply a matter of blind obedience, but encouragement, explanation, direction, correction and formation as they grow up towards maturity and independence.

Paul does provide a practical and positive side as well, in terms of mutual understanding, acceptance, tolerance and forgiveness, where things have gone wrong. This is the more down to earth approach that is necessary in family life and relationships in general.

We have the Feast today of Holy Family, which also idealizes the picture somewhat unrealistically for life today, with the imperfections, individual differences and idiosyncrasies of us all. Jesus as the perfect child, and Mary the model disciple, with the shadowy figure of Joseph in the background, as the responsible, hard-working provider, faithful husband and caring father, but about whom we know virtually nothing in detail.

And let's not forget the oldies here, with the faithful seniors Simeon and Anna counterbalancing each other and providing continuity with Jewish traditions in the Temple. Their joyful acceptance of the child Jesus has Luke providing the link between new and old, amplifying his conviction that this Saviour has come into humanity, with a universal and inclusive message of peace and good will for all to respond to.

Remember the old TV family shows like “*Father Knows Best*” and “*The Brady Bunch*”, somewhat idealising family with little connection with the ups and downs of family life? As a model, I tend to prefer “*The Addams Family*”, where different characters and their idiosyncrasies and oddities at all levels, ages and stages of life, are accepted and welcomed. If you don’t like them, there are always “*The Munsters*”, who likewise reflect similar positive family values of love, understanding and acceptance! I am not quite up with “*The Simpsons*”, although I think they have something positive and realistic going for them too!! And then there’s the importance of humour, and the capacity to laugh at ourselves.

So let’s appreciate our families and their complexities and be thankful for the formation we have had and the love shared and sacrifices made along the path of our lives as we celebrate family in all of its configurations and diversity.

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