

Sermon for 30th January 2022 (Epiphany 4) How Holy is our family? From Fr. Mike

- Psalm 48; 1 Cor.13.1-13; Ezekiel 43.27-44.4; **Luke 2.22-40**

Throughout my time in ministry, I have been repeatedly reminded how different the varied groups are in church, chaplaincy or the secular world. In one parish I served, the 'Twenties and Thirties' group was struggling because the events that appealed to the single Twenties and Thirties members were not as appealing or convenient for the married Twenties and Thirties members – let alone the ones with children. At another parish, I remember trying to plan an event for a diverse group of families. I suggested a particular time of day, keeping in mind the bedtime needs and impact for new infants. After much debate, one of the other staff reminded me that families with older children do not need to start bedtime nearly as early as those with young families. In one parish there was Holy Eucharist on a weekday at 6:30 am, followed by Bible Study from 7:00 – 8:00 am. For a sleep-deprived parent of a young child, the arrangement was hideous; but for those who worked in the City and needed to be there by 9:00, or for seniors who were up and fed well before 6:30 am, the timing was perfect. That is the funny thing about churches. Though we all arrive on Sunday on time, relatively speaking, to do the same thing together, we all enter those doors with vast differences. There are the basic differences – gender, age, marital status, and phase of life. There are the personality differences – introverts or extroverts; morning or night people; spiritually expressive or quiet and contemplative. And then there is what we bring in the door with us on any particular day. Perhaps you just barely managed to dress and wrangle kids into the car, probably running out of time to do much tending to yourself to get ready for church? Perhaps you often wake up with aches and pains, but dig

deep and 'will yourself' to worship anyway. Perhaps you had a fight with a loved one or colleague recently, perhaps even with a fellow parishioner, and you are not even sure if you are in the right mindset for church? When we take into account all those widely diverse features of any particular gathered group, we begin to see how amazing the idea is that we even manage to gather together at all.

The Holy Family

I see a similar dynamic on the day that the holy family went to the temple for purification. Mary needed to offer sacrifice in thanksgiving for a safe childbirth and traditional sacrifice needed to be offered for Jesus as the firstborn son of the family. This family has already been through a great ordeal these past 40 days. They managed to make their way to Bethlehem, had an eventful birth experience in a stable, strange visitors randomly appeared, and all are now back home. I imagine at 40-days-old, Jesus is still not sleeping through the night, Mary and Joseph are still working out this first-time parenting thing, and we can tell from their sacrifice of two turtledoves or young pigeons that the young couple is still struggling financially. That this particular family made it to the temple for the traditional religious experience is a minor miracle in itself! We all know couples who have been in that stage of life at one point or another.

Simeon – *the man of song*

Meanwhile, we have old Simeon. He has 'been around the block a bit' and has been waiting for a long time for a promise to be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That means that Simeon has spent a lot of time at the temple, just

waiting for that long-anticipated day. We know that Simeon is righteous and devout, and that the presence of the Holy Spirit is strong in him. He is a man wise beyond his years, who has been taught to look for just the right thing. We also know that he is a **man of song**. When he finally sees Jesus, he breaks into a song of praise (*Nunc Dimittis*) that is now known worldwide, sung at Evensong and said at Compline or after Eucharists. We know too that he is not afraid to tell the cold, hard truth, as he warns Mary what hardship is to come her way through her relationship with her son. We all know a fellow worshipper or two from church who both show forth a Spirit-filled life, yet are never afraid to speak truth – no matter how stinging that truth might be.

Anna – the chatterbox

Finally, we meet Anna. Anna is in her eighties. She has been a widow for about sixty of those years, so we know she has had a rough life. We also know that she spends every waking hour at the temple, worshiping, praying, and fasting. The temple is the centre of her life. We also learn that Anna is a talker. When she sees Jesus for the first time, not only does she praise God, but she also talks about the child to anyone who will listen. Surely, we have met that older church gossip, who is always full of church news.

Messy church?

So, we have this beautiful scene set before us: the frazzled young family, struggling both physically and financially to just get by; the wise, righteous older man who is filled with the Spirit, but holds nothing back – not even if maybe he should; and the older prophet whose whole life is at the temple, and who has no problem catching people up on temple news. In truth the scene is a bit

comical. Although the scene is meant to be another Epiphany-tide manifestation of the identity of Jesus Christ, the scene is almost absurd in reality.

As I pondered this scene I could not help thinking about our community of faith, and how absurd we probably seem to outsiders. We have all sorts of **parents** with children of various ages – many of whom have shared their own frazzled lives to me on Sundays. We have **teens and students** - who struggled to get out of bed to come to church, but who are listening and will ask really challenging questions from time to time. We have '**empty-nesters**' - so overjoyed to have a new lease on life that they are equally likely to be found at some exciting location as they are to be found at church. We have **retirees** - deeply spiritual, who will also give you a piece of their mind. We have **musical members** who love when the organist of the day plays a voluntary or the University vocalists sing anthems; and members who avoid church when it is a service of Mattins. We have members who will come to every Holy Week service, and other members who are lucky to make it to church on Easter Sunday.

If you look at our wide diversity, you might wonder how in the world we all call the *same community* home; and yet we all do, and most of us cannot imagine life without this community. **That messy diversity is the joy of church.** Though that older member might take you to task on something, you also know that they often speak with the love of someone who knows you can take it and you need to hear it. Though there are Sundays when families feel like the behaviour of their children has made their worship experience a complete irritation, equally, there are members around you who only get a glimpse of joy that week *by being near your child* and getting to know their beautiful personalities. Though that church gossip might frustrate you at times,

s/he is also the same one who has been praying for you and brought you a meal when you were sick... the list goes on.

What are we 'shown' this week?

That is what I love about the text this Sunday and the reality of Church. Both the text and Church are extremely **incarnational** – they show us the depths of our messiness, but the beauty that can only emerge from that messiness. Both show us how no matter how wacky the people are, God still turns up to meet us, and shows us some really important things – revealing true **joy**, lasting **hope**, and endless **grace**.

Both show us that no matter how challenging our varied community might be at times, at its best, our faith community shows us how to better love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbour.

No matter what stage of life we are in, what personality we bring to the table, or what hurdles we overcame to get ourselves to public worship, we truly need each other because God needs and uses each of us.

For that messy, challenging, incarnate community of faith, I am forever grateful. That is the 'good news' we celebrate today, and the good news that we invite all our messy, challenging, incarnate friends (from all walks of life) into as well. Amen.

Fr. Mike 30th January 2022 (Epiphany 4)