

Homily for Feast of the Holy Family 2017

Hanging on a wall at home is a parchment I picked up in Egypt many years ago. It is of the kind produced in thousands for the tourist trade and costing little. The one I have is a depiction of the Egyptian tree of life. It is an acacia tree on which there are five birds representing five stages of life, the youngest at the bottom the oldest at the top. The lower four face East symbolising growing life. The very top bird faces West, that is, facing death. Shakespeare had a version common in the Middle Ages of the various ages of life in his play "As You Like It". There are seven stages in his scheme: infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, old age, and imminent death. Symbolic depictions of life and others like it represent an ordered life with direction and purpose. If we were to make one today what would we put in it? The beginning the end would be the same. But the rest?

In that context I would like to take up from last week where I spoke of Mary's sinlessness being that she never missed the point of her life. The sinlessness in Catholic doctrine is that of Mary being conceived free from original sin. Original sin is not personal sin for which we are responsible. It refers more to the awareness we come to that as St Paul says "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7: 19f). We endlessly seek what we think is good but often miss the mark. What we think is good turns out to be not as good as we thought. Some then conclude that there is no point at all.

Many of us take a long time, if ever, to discover what the point of our life is. Many dead ends, mistakes, and wrong turns inhabit our journey. And what we do at each stage of life can change dramatically. Does this mean we are bad? Not at all. It is just that we are part of a world that is somehow flawed so that we cannot see clearly enough to recognise our path. For myself, that journey meant distinguishing between what I assumed the Church expects of a priest, what people expect of a priest, and what I expect of myself. Some clarity emerges only after one makes the daily commitment to embrace the journey. No one knows what marriage and family life will mean until it is begun. Mary was freely able to make that commitment with her "Be it done unto me.." before she knew its cost. She learned of that cost as we heard at the presentation in the Temple. She faced it again when Jesus was left behind in Jerusalem. She grew in faith when the wider family began to think Jesus possessed or drunk. And her grief was real at the cross. She knew the point of her life.

The Feast of the Holy Family tells of a family whose life journey appears to be well planned by God before hand. We might think they had it easier than us. That is a view only arrived at after the faith of the resurrection looking back on Jesus life and ministry. Because of his divine mission everything else is seen and put into the context of that faith.

Perhaps on this Feast we might think of the strategies we might use to help us in our families, communities and Church to recognise the point of our lives. To be Catholic simply put means to be welcoming to all, to create and become a communion. So here are five values to keep in mind: 1. Make sure every family member feels cherished, respected and included. So we do celebrate birthdays and important moments in each persons life. 2. Find ways to welcome the person who is different with an open heart and open mind. The guiding principle is the way Jesus welcomed all kinds of people. 3. Favour the ones who need the favour most. At a particular time a person who is poor in some way needs our priority. 4. Be part of the local faith community. The domestic church of the family needs the support of a wider community. So we come together each Sunday to pray with and for each other. 5. Be a family of reconciliation. There is no perfect family. We all share the challenge of living together so we need to learn to admit mistakes, say we are sorry, ask forgiveness, and grant forgiveness without revenge. When you think about it those five values underpin what we mean by the Eucharist as the thanksgiving sacrifice of reconciliation creating a holy communion amongst different people.

This doesn't exhaust at all what it means to be Catholic. But with these fundamental Gospel values our families and Church both proclaim the Gospel and teach the faith to children. It all begins at a most basic level. If we can't get that far then we have little chance for the future where bigotry, revenge, and selfishness rule. Our world may not be as predictable as once appeared to be the case. Yet after all we are not so very different from Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. The point of our lives in general terms is to love God and to love our neighbour as oneself. How this is lived in practice is the challenge. Jesus has shown us the way. Fr Graham