



Bishop Stephen Wright

Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. 31st December 2023

Dear Sisters, dear Brothers,

May I wish you every blessing in this Christmas Season. I pray it has been a joyful, peaceful season thus far.

I was recently in a conversation about when people take down their Christmas decorations. The tradition of twelfth night or the Solemnity of the Epiphany seemed to be winning but the Season of Christmas runs until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which we will celebrate on Monday 8th January. The Season is longer than twelve days. There is a more ancient tradition, which I know is still practiced today in some parishes and homes around the world. The decorations remain in place until the fortieth day after Christmas Day, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, on the 2nd February. I do not wish to set any disagreements off in family life, please keep and enjoy your traditions. In any case you may well have to ask, will the tree survive for forty days? Today, we have a blessed compromise as we listen to Gospel of the Feast of the Presentation. It is good to hear it now because it really is a Christmas Gospel. We meet the beautiful and inspiring elderly characters, Simeon and Anna, in the Temple as the Lord is presented and His mother, Mary, receives the traditional prayers and rituals after giving birth.

The Season of Christmas celebrates not only the birth of the Lord but celebrates His early manifestations to the world. We celebrate the Lord being shown to others for the first time. The Holy Family of Jesus grows with each encounter. Mary and Joseph meet the newborn Lord first. Then the Shepherds, the Magi and in our Gospel today Anna and Simeon. The Season of Christmas closes with the Lord making Himself known to wider society at His Baptism. He will call His first followers, and we His Church are the continuation of His family. We are called to be the Holy Family of the Lord. As an adult:

Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and Mother!" (Matthew 12:48-50).

Anna and Simeon represent all those of mature years. In his ministry Pope Francis has raised the spiritual profile of the elderly in the Holy Family that is the Church. He created an annual World Day of Prayer for Grandparents and the Elderly to mark the Feast of St Joachim and St. Anne, Mary's parents, Jesus' grandparents. We celebrate that in July. Pope Francis speaks of the vocation of the Third Age and their importance:

From the elderly we received the gift of belonging to God's holy people. The Church, as well as society, needs them, for they entrust to the present the past that is needed to build the future. (Pope Francis)

Wisdom comes with experience. The older we become the more we have experienced both the joys and pains in life. The more we have experienced God's grace at work in us. The more we can look back with a truer sense of perspective. We see what really is important and what is not. We learn from our elders. We should hold them in high regard and respect. Meeting more and

more people across our Diocese I can see the many, many blessings we receive from those who are not in the spring of youth, shall we say. Thank you to you all. You will know of the Annas and Simeons in your families and parishes who have assisted us in our faith journeys.

Mary and Joseph are about to learn from Anna and Simeon. In the words of Pope Francis, they are about to entrust the past, that is the hopes of all the People of God, to the present, Mary and Joseph, so that they, Mary and Joseph, in their Holy Family at Nazareth can help build the future of Jesus' ministry.

Anna and Simeon have found the wisdom of daily prayer and hopeful perseverance in the Lord. We should pray for that same wisdom. They are waiting for God to act, as He promised he would, by sending the Saviour. One can imagine, daily, both Anna and Simeon looking out for young couples bringing their children into the Temple. Is it him? It is only due to them being so Spirit filled that they finally recognise their Saviour as a forty-day old first born accompanied by a poor married couple. Finally, at last, Simeon sees the one who is promised. It is such a moving scene as Simeon holds the child Jesus, and sings:

Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you have promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.

Simeon's prayer is the traditional night prayer of the Church. It is the song of a man joyful that the Lord has kept his promise. It is the faith filled song of a man ready to meet God face to face. Let it be our nightly prayer too.

We are told Mary and Joseph listened to all that was said about them and their child. They were confused by some of it, no doubt. Jesus is the light of the world, and his holiness and love will shine for all peoples for all time. Jesus is the salvation promised by God and spoken of by the Prophets. Mary is told in no uncertain terms that her heart will be pierced. Words no doubt she would recall as she stood at the foot of the Cross.

Mary and Joseph were learning that their family was one that would grow encounter by encounter to be the Church that we have today. The Gospel ends with the Holy Family returning to Nazareth where the next thirty years or so would be known only by Mary and Joseph. Under their care Jesus grew in maturity. The Church always speaks of the vital role of the family as the privileged setting where every person learns to give and receive love. It is an indispensable foundation for society. The family is the school that enables us all to grow to the full measure of our humanity. Every family is called to be a place of love and service.

The Church rightly upholds the dignity and importance of the Sacrament of Matrimony. It is a gift from the Lord for family life. The Church is also called to accompany all families in their journey through life towards their heavenly home. As we celebrate the Holy Family let us pray for our families. May they be filled with love and service. In the light of Anna and Simeon let us pray in thanksgiving for the older generations. May they be wise guides and may we listen with respect. May they entrust the next generation with the God filled presence of the past so as to build the future.

With assurances of prayers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ Stephen