

Pastoral Letter Of Terence Patrick Drainey



Bishop of Middlesbrough

Feast of the Holy Family (Readings Year B)

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

During the Christmas season it is really good to have the crib not only at the front of our minds but displayed prominently in our churches. It gives a warm sense of contentment to gaze into that familiar scene; Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, ox and donkey, shepherds and perhaps the odd angel or two. Yes, it is very reassuring to see the Holy Family gathered in the stable at Bethlehem.

However, if you will permit, let me set the scene as it really happened, at least in my mind. Even before Jesus was born, the trouble began - Joseph found that Mary, his fiancée was pregnant, and he knew he was not the father. Does he report her to the authorities, which would mean death by stoning for Mary? Does he marry her and pretend the child is his, or does he quietly get rid of her? We know that it was only through the intervention of an angel that he decided to take Mary to himself.

However, that wasn't the end of the trouble. The Roman dictators forced him to leave his home just as the child was about to be born and go to Bethlehem where he and his wife had to stay for some time in order obtain their official papers. They had no money, they knew no one and Mary was about to have her baby. The only accommodation they could find was a cowshed behind a local hostelry. What a place to be born!

The time came for the baby to be taken to the temple to be presented. However, they didn't have enough money to pay the fees, so they had to have a second-class celebration. While in the Temple two old and rather strange religious people told them that their baby was going to be very important - they liked that - but that he was going to cause his mother much pain.

It is at this point in the story that the political state of the country became so bad that Joseph decided, again through divine intervention, to move to Egypt (not much different from today – the Rafah Border Crossing from Gaza to Egypt). They had no money, no place to stay and they couldn't speak the language. Still, Joseph was a carpenter and carpenters were always in demand. Eventually they returned to Nazareth at which point Joseph became sick and died. Mary was left with Jesus who really worried her. He began preaching and teaching so that people thought he was mad. Mary didn't know what to think. Then she remembered the angel had told her that he would be *Son of the Most High*. So far, he had just seemed like any other boy and young man. But now, he was telling people that he was indeed God's Son.

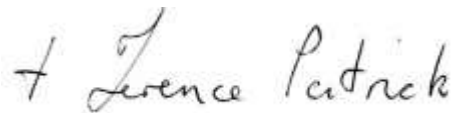
I could continue with the story, but I think you get the point. The family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were not exempt from the problems, the trials, and tribulations that all families have to face. They might have been the *Holy* Family, but they were not a fairy-tale family. In so many ways they found themselves in the same circumstances as many do today. Their lives were not far removed from the reality of ours.

Nevertheless, they are the "Holy" family. So, what makes them different, or at least holy? Let me offer you two thoughts. First of all, at the heart of this particular family was God, in Jesus, the Son of God become man, but also the Spirit of God was living in Mary and Joseph. God dwelt in the midst of the Holy Family, never far away from their thoughts and their way of life. Secondly, they were a family of faith. Mary especially believed everything that the Lord had promised would happen, even when circumstances and cold reason said differently. She trusted completely in the promises of the Lord. He had never let her down, and so she was prepared to follow wherever he led.

We too can have God right at the heart of everything we do. He does not have to be far removed from our way of life. We can invite the Spirit of God to live in our lives and begin to transform us. We know that in Jesus God is walking at our side each and every day. We can have faith, we can trust even though we might not be able to see the immediate outcome of things, even though we can't at this moment see how God's plan is going to work out.

Faith, trust, and the awareness of God's presence is what made the family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph able to journey through the ups and downs of life. Far from being a fairy-tale family, faith, trust, and the awareness of God's presence is what made them the Holy family. Faith, trust and the awareness of God's presence can also make us and our families holy. May this be our prayer and goal as we approach a New Year.

In blessed hope,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+ Lennox Patrick". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.

Bishop of Middlesbrough

To be read and made available on the Weekend of 30/31 December 2023