

PASTORAL LETTER
THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY
SUNDAY 31ST DECEMBER 2023

The early history of God's people is a family history. It is a history that marks a new beginning of humanity after the catastrophe of sin that is associated with the Garden of Eden. There the harmonious relationship between God, humanity and the animal kingdom broke down when the man and the woman preferred the deceit of the serpent to the reality brought into being by God. God chose Abram and Sarai as the parents of many descendants to whom God would again make the promise of everlasting life which was his gift to humanity at creation.

Today's reading from the Book of Genesis reveals that this divine plan, in which God and men and women collaborate, did not unfold in a straight forward or trouble free manner. These opening years of God's new family are characterised by faith, hesitation, anxiety, confusion and misunderstanding. They reinforce the fact that God's family, which is to be a holy family, is human in its nature. Abram and Sarai were called to a relationship with God that had to be lived in the concrete circumstances of the place and culture in which they lived. The fact that God had chosen and called them did not smooth the difficulties away or clear away the obstacles they discovered in the path they travelled as they wished to be faithful followers of God's promise.

The questions Abram raised made a difference to his expectations of God, but also to his sense of his own identity, of what sort of family he was expected to give birth to, and of the extent to which God was being truthful to him in the unfolding of his promise to Abraham about the father he was being called to be, and the mother that Sarai wanted to be. These questions and the reality that gave rise to them did not mean that Abram's descendants could not be a holy family; but nor did being a holy family mean that men and women were to be spared the anguish that being human involves in human relationships and in humanity's relationship with God.

That truth is reinforced by the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews that adds to this history of Abraham and Sarah the emotional depths they had to face when Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice the only son, Issac, that they were likely to have. It would have been natural for them to have asked, as readers of the narrative have also asked, what sort of God is it that asks parents to kill their child under any circumstances, let alone those in which the child has been promised by God to a husband and wife who have been chosen by God to be the parents of many nations. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews recognises in the conclusion of that narrative, when an angel prevents Abraham from killing his son, a foreshadowing of Jesus' resurrection. The author read on our behalf that narrative with hindsight, but the distress remains after the relief, and emphasises the fact of sorrow as part of the human condition.

Even Simeon could not conceal that in his elation at being allowed to carry in his arms the Son who is the light to the nations and the glory of God's people Israel. The sorrow as well as the joy of humanity is part of the lived experience of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It is something that supports our own faith that Jesus, the Word and Son of God made flesh, is truly human simultaneously with being divine. Jesus is also Isaac, the only Son, who goes further than the original Isaac, by going willingly to the cross, so that his human brothers and

sisters can be led by him to the glory of heaven and to the fullness of humanity's relationship with God as determined by God at creation.

Our celebration of the Feast of the Holy Family shows, and does not diminish, the presence of suffering in humanity as a whole, and in God's people, understood as those who have heard God's call to faith and who accept it as a potent reality in their own lives as individuals and as members of their family. Even so, sorrow is far from being God's last word as Isaac and Jesus show. There is the Holy Family of Nazareth as well as the holy family of all God's beloved humanity. There is also the Holy Family being constituted by the holy men, women and children being gathered around God the Father, Jesus his Son, and the Holy Spirit in heaven, with Our Lady and St Joseph first among them. Family life is the first blessing that God gave to his new people. It is his pledge that he has not abandoned or forgotten his human offspring but that he loves his chosen creation with the same delighted love with which he loves his only begotten Son, the first born of all creation.