



PURSUING THE HOLY FAMILY

An essay by

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INTRODUCTION

There is a persistent longing throughout human history, and across cultures, to see the family as the core social structure. This remains so today: family is viewed as central to human flourishing. However none of us have to look very deeply before we discover enormous diversity in the understanding of what makes up a family, both down through history and across diverse cultures and the major world religions.

In the UK, as elsewhere, we develop images of what we see as 'the ideal family'. This image has changed through our history, and notably in recent decades. However through all the changes, the pursuit of it remains. We could see this as the pursuit of 'the ideal, or even, holy family'.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF DEPICTING THE HOLY FAMILY

The Holy Family is understood in the Christian faith, across all traditions, as the family of Jesus himself. Yet the image portrayed of this family being the baby, infant or even child Jesus with his father Joseph and mother Mary, is one that has emerged through time rather than one portrayed in any great detail in the pages of the gospels themselves.

In the Roman Catholic Church the Feast Day of the Holy Family was only added into the General Calendar by Pope Benedict XV in 1921. In 1969 it was moved from the Sunday after Epiphany to the Sunday between Christmas and Epiphany. This inevitably focusses on the Holy Family around the infant Jesus. In Christian art, whilst paintings of the Madonna (Mary the mother of Jesus) and Child are found in the Catacombs of Priscilla as early as the late second century, the first known artwork depicting Joseph as part of the Holy Family is probably that of Luca Signorelli in 1490. What then happens is something of an explosion of artistic interest in the theme with Mantegna, Durer, Joos van Cleve, Raphael, Lorenzo Lotto and others all producing paintings in the following 20-30 years. El Greco's famous painting of the theme is from 1595. Western artists have continued to depict the Holy Family in a variety of ways ever since.

In the Eastern Church the story is rather different, at least in the Egyptian Coptic Church. Alongside celebrating the Nativity, Circumcision, Epiphany and Presentation there is the celebration of the Flight into Egypt. This falls on June 1st and includes for many pilgrimage to The Church of the Holy Virgin (Gabal al-Tayr) built by Empress Helena, mother of Emperor



Constantine, in 328AD. (She also built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.) Two million pilgrims participated in 2022.

The particular emphasis on Mary as Virgin mother of Jesus was influenced by the Gospel of James written in the second century. This is where the story of Mary herself being virgin born to Joachim and Anna is found. Joseph is not portrayed with any sympathy at all in this writing. It is here that the notion that Joseph was an older widow who already had children is presented. The downplaying of Joseph owes more to this writing, I argue, than the small portrayal of him in the gospels.

In other early church writings St John of Chrysostom is the one who writes most extensively on Marriage and Family Life. He roots these deeply in the Scriptures. So I find it intriguing how little use he makes of any reference to the Holy Family. This is not for him a regular ready-made example on which to draw.¹

This leaves me pondering what, if anything, is to be drawn from the family experience of Jesus himself that might speak into how we see family today. Do the gospels themselves offer us any insight?

JESUS' FAMILY IN THE GOSPELS

It is a matter of piecing fragments together from all four gospels to discover something of Jesus' family life. Yet whilst scattered fragments, these are not insignificant, and they do develop a picture which highlights both the importance of the family for Jesus, and its clear limitations. It also impacts his teaching.

Marriage

Whilst brief, both Matthew and Luke's nativity accounts make it clear that both Mary and Joseph held marriage as important. The apparent breaking of her vows by Mary placed them both in a difficult, even dangerous, situation. Both have to trust in God's promise and word in their response to Mary's virginal conception by the Holy Spirit. Marriage vows, and their upholding, matter deeply. But nothing is explored of just how those vows were undertaken. The nearest we have to that is the celebration of the Wedding at Cana, 30 years later. A marriage celebrated, clearly with many people, in a wide community context. Here, marriage is celebrated by the whole community. Jesus not only joins in the celebration but enables it to continue well. He also uses a variety of images from marriage and weddings in his parables and teaching (c.f. the two Parables of the Wedding Feast and the Ten Virgins: *Matthew 22.1-14; Luke 14.7-14; Matthew 25.1-13; and the fasting question: Matthew 9.14-17*)

¹ A helpful collection on St John of Chrysostom I know is that by Catherine Roth, *St Vladimir Press, 1986*



I find I cannot read *Matthew 1.25* in any other way than to suggest that after Jesus' birth Joseph and Mary did have a sexually intimate relationship as husband and wife. The notion of 'perpetual virgin' has for me no basis in Scripture. Indeed I think it contributes to the idea some hold that sexual intimacy is 'not quite holy'. This does not square with the significance of the marriage bond, including its expression in sexual intercourse, that emerges throughout the Scriptures in the way that the marriage bond is used as an image of God's relationship with God's people – and the use of adultery as a common image for the breaking of the covenant by God's people.

So whilst not tightly defined in how it was celebrated, marriage and the marriage bond matter in the family of Jesus. Its core is the relationship of husband and wife, but it is clearly held in a wider community context. It is not simply a personal or private agreement.

Parenting

The infancy narratives also highlight the place of both mother and father in the care and raising of children. Both Joseph and Mary are engaged in the stories throughout. This is more extensive in Luke's gospel as the story runs through to the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve years old. Whilst Simeon's prophecy does focus on Mary (*Luke 2.34f*) Luke makes it quite clear that Joseph and Mary are equally engaged in the circumcision and the presentation in the Temple. The same equal role is depicted in the visit to Jerusalem and the search for the missing child (*Luke 2.41-52*). Mary is noted throughout for her pondering and treasuring of the memories (*Luke 2.19, 51*). This is likely because by the time Luke comes to write his gospel, Mary is still alive to share her story with him. Joseph has probably died. Throughout these narratives, Jesus is clearly depicted as growing up within the context of a family and household, and within the wider context of a community. The reason his absence was not noted for a whole day (*Luke 2.44*) was because it would be quite normal for a twelve year old well known in a community to be off with others from that community as they travelled together. It was only his non-appearance at the end of that day that raised concern. Here we might find ourselves connecting with the 'African' proverb, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. It certainly feels very different from the isolated care and raising of children that can be encompassed by the parent worried that their child has not texted in the past 30 minutes stating exactly where they are, and with whom.

The place and role of the wider family and community in the care and raising of a child does come through our understanding of how Jesus would have grown and developed in Nazareth. The two summary verses about Jesus' growth highlight the roundedness of this as physical, mental, social and spiritual (*Luke 2.40, 52*). There was no confining of every aspect of child rearing sitting only with Mum and Dad, as is sometimes conveyed in our own society (or even just Mum or just Dad in many cases).

There is one earlier instance on which to reflect also. The Flight into Egypt recorded by Matthew. At the very least this reveals the precariousness of life for this new family. It



makes them refugees, presumably for a number of years (the Copts calculate it at around three and a half years). On their return they go back to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem. Such an experience would have shaped their family life, and Jesus himself would have some memories of his earliest years in Egypt.

The wider family and community

As we know, there is otherwise silence on Jesus' growing up and his years in Nazareth, other than little snippets that help build a picture. Jesus clearly learned his father's trade as a carpenter. Thus he would have been involved in building people's homes, making furniture and agricultural tools (*Matt 13.55*). We can ponder how much he might have moved around the region plying his trade, alongside his father and brothers. For the gospels also make it clear that Jesus had brothers and sisters (*Matt 12.46; 13.55f; Mk 6.3; John 2.12; 7.3,5,10*). We know the brothers' names. Traditionally, Roman Catholic teaching has held that these children are from a previous marriage of Joseph (as per the Gospel of James). However there is no hint of this in the gospel texts. It could be that Jesus was in fact followed by these naturally born siblings. This may also explain Jesus waiting until he was thirty before leaving home and beginning his public ministry. If, as seems likely, Joseph died sometime during Jesus' teenage years (though we must note that the 'teenage' culture only emerged in the 1950s; for most of human history 'teenagers' were working adults and often parents) then as eldest son he took on responsibility for supporting his widowed mother and his younger siblings. Thus in family life Jesus experienced loss and bereavement. He learned about changing roles within the family. He undertook family care responsibilities. These continue to play out at the Cross when he ensures that his mother will be supported by John the disciple (*John 19.26f*). Was he uncertain how his siblings would cope? It certainly points to immediate family relationships not always being primary in Jesus' way of doing things.

As a family they were regulars in worship at their local synagogue (*Lk 4.16*). As a boy Jesus would have attended there to learn to read the Torah. He probably learned to write. Quite possibly he would have had a smattering of languages too: Aramaic for everyday; Hebrew for the Scriptures; Greek for everyday functioning in wider Galilee and perhaps words of Latin from Roman soldiers. Had he also learned some Egyptian in his earliest days?

All of this adds up to Jesus being part and parcel of a large family living out everyday life for many years. He grew and developed, experienced changing patterns in family living. He did all of this as part of a wider community in which his family was known. Family mattered to him. He hallowed ordinary family life. He showed that everyday work is holy.

THE SINGLE LIFE

Yet Jesus never marries. This was unusual. It was expected that everyone would marry. Having a wife, for the men, and a husband, for the women, was the norm. It was important both for mutual care and support but also for having children and maintaining the family line. Look at the importance placed by both Matthew and Luke on Jesus having a family



genealogy (*Matt 1.1-17; Lk 3.23-38*). Jesus fulfils his divine calling entirely as a single person, rooted in a family and community, yet also in many ways estranged from it.

Historically the call to a single celibate life has been raised to a higher worthiness than that of marriage. The danger with this is that it has suggested that aspects of marriage are unholy or unworthy. Yet in pursuing the holy family ideal there is an equal danger that those who do not marry, or those who do but are unable to have children, are devalued.

In other words, both singleness and marriage and family life can be falsely idolised. As human beings we are experts at creating idols of those things which are God's gift to us. So throughout our history we have created idols of the sun, moon, earth, fire, water, money and individuals. We are quite capable therefore of turning single celibacy, a specific form of family life (like the nuclear one) into some form of idol at whose feet we bow, investing in it power and authority that belong rightly to God the Creator of all things. We need to beware that the pursuit of the holy family might be in danger of creating an idol of a specific family type.

Somehow Jesus' singleness ought to ensure that we absolutely hold the value of the single life and its completeness in its own right alongside the equal value of married life for those who choose it. We should idolise neither. Clearly, as a single man, Jesus took part in family life. He also valued the company of friends as he gathered a group around him and was supported in his ministry notably by a group of women (*Lk 8.1-3*). He sustained relationships that he both nurtured and that nurtured him.

Indeed it is clear that family relations became very strained during the three years of Jesus' public ministry. His mother and his siblings were concerned that he had lost his mind. They tried to pull him away from the public arena and back into the family fold (*Matt 12.46f; MK 3.31-35; John 2.12; 7.3,5*) Jesus now had a strained relationship with the family. Perhaps they thought he had abandoned them in some way.

Into this whole background then falls Jesus' specific teaching on marriage and on family. As Jenn Strawbridge makes clear in her essay for the Commission, there is a clear ambivalence in Jesus' teaching about family. It certainly cannot be held as totally sacrosanct and does not have the top priority for Jesus. God's rule and reign comes before family. It is not that family responsibilities cease, but they take on a new perspective within the bigger vision of God's kingdom. Family responsibilities can neither be removed, nor made totally sacrosanct.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of seeing the family as the fundamental building block of society is clear. However, just what is meant by 'family' in this persistence does vary through the ages and across cultures. At its core there is a foundational covenantal relationship of marriage. Until very recent times this has been regarded as always between a man and a woman (or in some settings more than one partner). The procreation of children and the maintenance of



the family and community line have been key to the purpose of this. So it is perhaps inevitable that some pursuit of an ideal family will always take place. This 'ideal' in Christian history can be connected to the pursuit of a/the 'holy family'.

Yet when we take a look at the gospel texts, and indeed the tradition of how 'the Holy Family' has been perceived and depicted, we discover the basic reality that there are very few firm parameters by which to measure it.

A marriage covenant is clearly there; so too, I would argue, is the place of sexual intimacy and procreation within this bond. The raising and care of children by parents matters; but must be seen within the setting of the wider family and community. The holy family also show us that facing difficult circumstances is normal. The holy family also shows us that family keeps changing shape as children develop, as new children arrive, as family members die and as taking on new responsibilities happens. The holy family also reveals that conflict and dispute within families happens – and even that these are not always easily resolved. Yet the holy family also shows us that a sense of responsibility and care for one another within the family remains and does not cease as family members grow older. All of this makes it clear that there isn't a permanently 'fixed' model for what a family looks like, or how it functions. Family is always changing in shape and in how all its members interact with one another. In the same way, family is always part of a wider community and society, and both impact on each other.

Alongside this is the deeply, seriously singleness, of Jesus, the one perfect human to have ever lived. It can perhaps be hard for those who are single to see themselves as 'measuring up' to Jesus. So there are other examples of non-perfect humans. Like Paul, possibly Lydia and many down through history. But what Jesus' singleness makes clear to us all is that to be 'complete' marriage is not necessary. Relationships with others certainly are, but not necessarily marriage. It also highlights that single people are still family people.

This overall lack of more detailed description and prescription could be taken as disappointing. I rather take it as clear evidence that in God's creative wisdom God has left us with the capacity to imagine and develop family life in a great diversity of ways. So that we are left free to explore the positives and negatives of small families, large families, moving communities, fixed communities and to recognise that in reality every family is a constantly changing and developing social unit. Family clearly was pivotal and foundational for Jesus. It was the context in which he grew up and developed. His family was very much part of a wider community. So it is foundational for us all, particularly in the nurturing and raising of children into maturity and adulthood. It is also often foundational in the care of family members in older age. Singleness must be seen as having a full place in the life of our society.

But family's exact shape is always moving. We cannot say that a perfect family 'looks like this'. We have to accept and recognise the huge diversity in family which exists. We can observe what does make for good family life. We can also observe what is unhealthy and damaging. In those observations we learn and can help each family, through all its changing



phases, be the best that it can be. Whilst the word 'love' never appears in relation to Jesus' family, we know that it is to be a mark of God's family, so must be of each family. This allows us therefore to go on pursuing the holy family, but in doing so we recognise that it will always be an ideal that will never be fully achieved. Yet holding out an ideal must not be allowed to turn into an idol.

The holy family does point us in some clear directions but not a neat, clearly defined answer to what the ideal family looks like, or even how it behaves. What it does persistently say to us all is that family does matter.