

Homily- A Holy Family- but asylum seekers too *Matthew 2:13-23*

I certainly hope that everyone has had a happy and holy Christmas season so far. I hope it has been a great family time for you too. My family celebrated Christmas yesterday at Surfers Paradise. For the first time in six years, our son Michael was with us to celebrate Christmas, having spent the previous five Christmas's in Timor. But we also had the absence of our son Paul who deployed overseas with the Army three weeks ago.

We all need to thank God for the families he has given us, and of course especially today we draw strength and inspiration from the Holy family of Joseph , Mary and Jesus.

However as preacher to you I have to be faithful to the texts we have been given , and all week I have struggled with this gospel text and what it says to us today. Having heard today's Gospel, we have to realize that the holy family started off as asylum seekers ! The gospel resonates with an issue at the forefront of our political agenda today .

It's hard to imagine that the first Christmas was able to be a celebration event like we have just had, for Joseph and his family . We hear he receives the word that they must flee to Egypt. He wakes Mary up and they leave that night . Can you imagine what terror must have entered the hearts of Joseph and Mary to hear that Herod would be wanting to kill their newborn baby Jesus.

Rather than having a few days rest after the birth , in Bethlehem, they have to travel 350 km to Egypt on foot, across the barren Negev desert. Having traveled through that desert myself I know how difficult that would have been . Its amazing that they survived. Even today there are no rest stops, no McDonald's, let alone oases for water. There is no food nor villages along the way- just dry barren desert . We don't get to hear how they were received by the Egyptians or found somewhere to live, presumably for several years in that foreign land . Certainly it seems they were not turned away , put in detention camp , or put on a lengthy immigration waiting list. When Joseph does get the word that Herod has died, he is still afraid to return to Bethlehem, and so they have a 500 km trek to Nazareth.

In selecting this reading for today, the church reminds us that Jesus started out his earthly life in a family on the run, as a refugee and asylum seeker. I am not sure if any of us in this parish have had the experience of having to flee our homeland for fear of being killed. However, I have met many people who have been in that situation. I have seen the terror in their eyes and felt the cry of their hearts. Its not natural nor comfortable for tribal people to travel far from their homeland, yet many people will spend this Christmas in a search for a safe place for their family .

I didn't intend to make this the main theme of my Homily today, but I would hope any consideration we have of the current asylum seeker debate, is done with genuine concern for the circumstances of asylum seekers. I appreciate it is difficult to generalize and understand the motives behind every one who is risking their lives to travel in unseaworthy boats, to get to Australia. But surely many of them are desperate and deserve our compassion. Many of them , like Jesus , would be on death lists in Iran or Iraq . Don't be conned by the arguments of Queue jumping. Most of them have no hope

of even getting in the Queue , such are the tiny refugee quotas we enforce . I would hope we are able to come up with a more generous regional response to asylum seekers . I actually find it ironic that the Muslim people of Malaysia and Indonesia show great compassion for hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers who arrive in their countries , while we get paranoid about a few thousand .

In coming back to the scriptural text it is clear that Joseph and Mary in their humanity, gave us an outstanding example of a family that hung together in adversity. The scriptures don't give us a lot of historical information of their family life but clearly Jesus grew up in their family home , and took on his fathers trade as a carpenter and builder. In his humanity , Jesus no doubt also took on many of the human qualities of his parents. Today while we talk of them as a holy family , there can be a temptation to imagine them as divine and beyond the human – perhaps beyond our capacity for holiness . But they were human and their holiness was a choice they made, just like any of us can .

The scripture tells us that Jesus grew up as a Nazarene. I went to Nazareth a few years ago . It is a place of no particular geographical significance. Indeed it was in the middle of Gentile territory in Galilee . 2000yrs ago it was a small settlement of maybe 800 Jewish people, who had come up from the Bethlehem area to live a holier lifestyle. They were part of a holiness movement that wanted to keep the Jewish law faithfully in contrast to the many secular or less faithful Jews and the hypocritical Jewish aristocracy that inhabited the bigger cities . Its important to remember that Jesus was Jew , and he spent 30 years of life and conditioning in this community before he headed out on mission . His extended community were faithful Jews , who prayed at home, worshipped in their local synagogue, and worked hard with their hands to eke out a living His human teachers were his parents and extended family. Sure he was divinely endowed , but God chose this holy community to also shape his humanity .

In St Pauls letter to the Colossians today we have the best summary of what holy families, both biological families and the extended local community families, should be like. Hear again some of these qualities ---- compassionate , humble , gentle, patient , forgiving patient , respectful, honouring of parents . I like this so much I m thinking of making a wall poster out of it , to remind me of what we should aspire to in my family .

God desires us to be holy families . God desires our community , our parish, to be a holy family . God has given us the Holy Family as a model. Like Joseph and Mary we will have to take on our share of suffering and trials. We will get anxious like them when our kids go off to do their own thing. Like them also we have the Holy Spirit available to guide us and watch over us.

But bottom line , like Joseph and Mary, we have to do our bit to put the holiness into our families. More and more we may see this as counter to the prevailing Australian culture , which is turning away from Christian values, and most recently is wanting even to change the definition of marriage . We may become like the Nazarenes, a minority group in wider society. But we will survive ; we will prevail ; we will thrive again in due course , for this is Gods desire for us and God will prevail .