

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



*✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



Pastoral Letter to be read in all parishes weekend of 26th and 27th December 2009 The Feast of the Holy Family

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This year only two days after welcoming the newborn Baby Jesus at Christmas we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family and in our Gospel Jesus is already twelve years old. Little is known of Jesus' early years with Mary and Joseph but the few details we have show us both a unique family, and one that had to face challenges that continue for families today.

Soon after Jesus' birth the family ended up as refugees in Egypt, fleeing from the wrath of Herod. Having settled down to the business of making a home and a living in Nazareth we hear today that, as people faithful to their Jewish religion, each year they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feast of the Passover. This particular year a tragedy befell Mary and Joseph that is the nightmare of all parents – losing their child in the crowd. For three frantic days they searched for him, and we can imagine the relief they felt on finding him. We can also understand Mary's question to him, "My child, why have you done this to us?" At twelve Jesus is on the threshold of adulthood according to Jewish tradition and his reply, "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" leaves her perplexed. Once again in these stories of Jesus' early years we hear that Mary "stored up all these things in her heart", to reflect on them more deeply. We are all invited to engage in the same kind of reflection.

Marriage and family life is full of ups and downs, hopes and dreams for the future, along with anxieties and worries. There is great celebration when hopes are fulfilled for couples or for their children. Just as there is great sadness when dreams remain unfulfilled, when there is failure and even breakdown in relationships.

Although coming from very different cultures our Readings on this Feast still speak to the needs and challenges of today. Hannah's prayer of offering her son Samuel to God's safe keeping is one echoed by parents of all ages. The whole episode of Jesus lost in the Temple resonates with the anxieties and worries of all parents as we know from news stories in the last few years. Mary's example of storing these events in her heart, of pondering over them in prayer is offered to all of us. For all of us, married or not, the opening words of our Second Reading speak of the invitation of this feast, "Think of the love that Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are." We are invited today to give thanks for God's love "lavished" on us in so many different ways and to respond by sharing that love with others. It is because we ourselves have been loved, by God, by our parents, by others in our lives, that we can love in return.

In celebrating this Feast we reaffirm our commitment to promoting and supporting the ideals of marriage and family life, as well as showing understanding and compassion to those involved when they meet with difficulties and tensions. In these ways God's love will continue to be seen to be lavished on us all.

May God's blessing be on all of you and your families in the coming year!

✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Bishop's House, East Denton Hall, 800 West Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE5 2BJ

Tel: +44 (0) 191 228 0003 Fax: +44 (0) 191 274 0432 Email: office@rcdhn.org.uk
Charity No: 235686