

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



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



Pastoral Letter

Feast of the Holy Family - Christmas 2010

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

First of all, let me wish you a happy and blessed Christmas.

Yesterday's great feast of the birth of Jesus still rings in our ears. Today at our Masses, we continue to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation through the Scriptures and in singing the traditional carols and hymns of the Christmas season. This year, on this first Sunday after Christmas, we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. We recall with joy how Jesus was born into a family, and how his family nourished his life and his faith in God as he grew to maturity. Today's Gospel paints a picture of hard decisions to be taken by Jesus' parents as they flee from the cruel jealousy of King Herod. Like Moses before him, Jesus the Messiah flees to Egypt where his family wait until it is safe to return. Today's Gospel tells us that Jesus is the fulfilment of all the hopes and fears of all the years and of his people, and of us.

From his birth, the gift of Jesus' family unfolded in the protection and nurture he received from his parents. Parents, as Pope Benedict has reminded us, are the 'first evangelisers' of their children. It is within the family that the faith we receive as a gift from God, is nourished. And the gift of faith grows and bears fruit in the lives we live and in the witness we bear to Jesus himself.

Today is also Boxing Day. Traditionally, this was the day when gifts for the poor were placed in a box outside the church. It was also a time when landlords gave their servants their Christmas box. In the gifts we give we express our love and hope for each other. We experience in our giving and receiving what the Incarnation means: God's unconditional love for each of us, made flesh in His Son in the family of Mary and Joseph.

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The visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom last September was a time of great joy for us all. Pope Benedict's warm greetings to us, and his simple and direct words about living our faith with love, encouraged ordinary people to take their responsibilities towards their neighbours seriously. During his visit, Pope Benedict reflected on what it means to live our faith in love, our faith in each other and in God. He said, 'How much we need, in the Church and in society, witnesses of the beauty of holiness, witnesses of the splendour of truth, witnesses of the joy and freedom born of a living relationship with Christ!' (Homily, Westminster Cathedral, 18 September 2010)

The Holy Family encourages us to witness joyfully to the mystery of God-with-us. In the Holy Family God invites us, through his Son Jesus Christ born as one of us, to open our hearts to the world around us and act accordingly. God calls us to be witnesses; but he calls us to be witnesses with joy. The Holy Family also reminds us to be joyful in our humanity nourished by our religious faith.

The Holy Family invites us to open our eyes again to the truth of Jesus among us, and the truth of seeing him in each other. At Christmas, we are invited to encounter the Son of God made flesh in the flesh of each other. So, on this feast and during these Christmas days, I invite you to look out with joy for the unexpected. I invite you to see in your family and in the person you might ignore or avoid, the gift of God celebrated in the birth of his Son, Jesus Christ. Christmas shows us how to be truly human, in Jesus Christ. And we do that with encouragement and joy. So be joyful in yourself, and with others, and especially in your family.

Happy Christmas to you all!

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