

HOLY FAMILY SUNDAY – YEAR B

“Prophetic Marriage and Family Life”

(Genesis 15:1-6, 21:1-3; Ps 105; Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2:22-40)

On Christmas day I managed to call most of our priests and pastoral ministers in our archdiocese, including those who came to help us out, to wish them a Merry Christmas and to share their experience of Christmas in their missions and parishes. Almost all of them spoke of more than usually packed churches across the archdiocese. One wondered where the people were coming from. Reflecting on this, I thought that perhaps this was an effect of the troubled economic times we are in globally, signaling a desire to return to more basic values, to reconnect with our roots, to be grounded in what is most important in our lives, and that is marriage and family life.

This phenomenon underlines the Church’s wisdom of having this feast of the Holy Family so soon after Christmas. I believe there is a greater need than ever for marriage and family to be prophetic, to speak a basic truth, to point out the way to a better future. Marriage and family life is meant to be the cornerstone of a healthy society.

Noted sociologist Reginald Bibby, in his book *The Boomer Factor*, quotes respected American journalist Walter Kirn as saying, “There is still only one way to be sane – enjoy your family, friends, faith and job – but every year there are new ways to be crazy.”

This touches on the increasing and even crazy pressure working against marriage and family life in our world today. Bibby outlines six modern trends that put pressure on marriage and family life:

- *From Dominance to Diversity*, the acceptance of pluralism and tolerance
- *From We to Me*, the acceptance of increasing individualism
- *From Deference to Discernment*, greater performance expectations
- *From Obligation to Gratification*, a consumption mindset
- *From Tomorrow to Today*, the rise of greater time expectations
- *From Knowing Too Little to Knowing Too Much*, the effects of the information explosion, Internet and computer technology

We need only think of the tragedy of the Ontario teenager who was addicted to a computer game. He ran away from home and died tragically in the bush after his parents took away his play-station.

There is also the ever increasing pressure to redefine the very nature of marriage and family life. Some countries and legislators are promoting same sex civil partnerships, euthanasia and reduced waiting periods for divorce, to name a few social pressures facing marriage and family life.

You may ask where this is all coming from. George Weigel, noted Church historian, claims that the root of this trend is the return of one of the most ancient of heresies, Gnosticism, which claims that human beings are infinitely plastic and malleable, that our human sexual nature is a cultural construct that can be changed and reconstructed at the whim of individuals and governments in the name of a mistaken notion of human freedom.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien, of St. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, made this comment following the introduction of such legislation in Scotland: "The family is the basic social unit, which needs to be recognized, protected and promoted as the most vital cell of society. Unfortunately this truth is being obscured today. It is not without reason that human societies throughout history and across cultures have flourished only when they have built their human relationships on the rock of marriage and a solid family life."

The readings today and the feast of the Holy Family are all about marriage and family life. They are all about the faith of a lowly and simple people, the Anawim, those who know they need God – couples like Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and Mary, and holy people like Simeon and Anna. It was the poor and lowly who recognized Jesus, not the rich and powerful. The readings are all about the fulfillment of a culture, a religion, and a promise of a greater future through the faith of Abraham and Sarah, through the faith and love of Joseph and Mary, and finally, through Jesus who came into the world by means of marriage and family life and whose genealogy is painstakingly recorded by Matthew in his gospel.

The truth is that human beings are not infinitely malleable, cultural constructs but persons created in the image and likeness of God who is love, relationship, family and intimacy. We are hard-wired for God and instilled with deep human needs for love, belonging and self-worth that will be fully satisfied only when we meet God face to face.

In the meantime, marriage and family life is the best way to meet our human needs. A functional family, a prophetic family, is based on love which creates security, a sense

of belonging, and an environment of peace and order.

Faith is central to a healthy marriage and family life. There is still truth to the saying that a family that prays together stays together. I credit my vocation to priesthood and now the episcopacy to the prayer life that I experienced in my family. I still remember the peace that reigned in our home after we prayed the rosary, and the peace that filled our car returning home from church on Sunday. Years later I felt that same peace upon my arrival at the Oblate novitiate as I explored a possible vocation to priesthood and Oblate religious life. That peace let me know I was where I belonged, so I stayed and was eventually ordained a priest.

Expressed love is also central to a healthy marriage and family life. What kids need most, even more than the love that parents have for them individually, is the love and affection that the parents have for each other. I remember picking up a lady in Meadow Lake to take her to a pilgrimage in Saskatoon. As her husband said goodbye, her thirty year old daughter asked, "Aren't you going to kiss her?" and as he stooped to give her a peck on the cheek, her 16 year old son blurted out, "On the lips, on the lips!" They both needed to see that affection of their parents for each other that grounded them in security.

I dream of an archdiocese where every family would have a weekly family night consisting of a meal together, no TV, some prayer based on scripture, honest sharing of their lives and then some games. What a difference that would make to the quality of our families and the church in our archdiocese.

A long-time friend of mine, Wesley Jamieson, president of Tri-City surveys in Saskatchewan, would stay in the rectory in Beauval with me years ago whenever his work took him to the north. Every night he would call his wife collect just to share their day. I commented that this practice must get to be expensive. He replied that it was not an expense, it was an investment. He is a wise man.

In his 1994 *Letter to Families*, JP II asserted that marriage and family life are windows into the divine world: human experiences that give us some insight into the inner life of God. The family, he claimed, is perhaps the clearest mirror or reflection of the community of self-giving love and receptivity that is God as Holy Trinity. And that makes the family prophetic.

I experienced that reality some years back as I was visiting a friend. His fifteen year old daughter came back from a soccer tournament, burst into the house, dropped her

bag on the floor, flopped on her dad's lap, put her arm around his neck, and nestled her head against his for at least a minute, soaking up his love. He carried on with our conversation as if this was totally normal and expected. The other kids did not even notice, and his wife carried on preparing supper. This *was* normal in this household. I caught my breath and observed with awe this intimate father-daughter relationship that might be as close to a picture of heaven as I will see on this earth.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is our faith family meal. We share in the table of God's Word and the table of the Eucharist. With humble faith we recognize Jesus and experience his love. That love empowers us to go out and be prophetic to a world that needs a reminder as to what is most basic in our lives.

So today, as we continue to celebrate Christmas and the feast of the Holy Family, let us pray for humble faith and love to make our marriages and family life prophetic and life-giving to the world.