

## Holy Family 2023

SFX

On this feast of the Holy Family, we might be drawn to think of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and their home life in Nazareth. But our Gospel today takes us to the **Temple in Jerusalem**, and we meet those lovely figures of Simeon and Anna. The beautiful Simeon, an ideal old man filled with the spirit of God, devout and upright. And Anna, whose “days of girlhood were over” who in her widowhood had found her home in the Temple.

Simeon had been promised that he would not die until he saw the Messiah with his own two eyes. He took the child in his arms, blessed God and sang, and we might imagine beamed a great big smile. And Anna couldn't stop praising God and telling everyone about it.

You almost feel that Simeon and Anna could have walked out of the pages of the Old Testament. I think they are wonderful figures for today, New Year's Eve. Because in St Luke's Gospel they are in some sense representative figures that mark the transition from the **old to the new**. They were able to take the Christ-child in their arms and look forward in hope. Just as we are called to do this New Year's Eve to say 'Goodbye', to thank God for **all that has been**, all the blessings we have received, but also hand over the sadness and loss that might have come our way. Trusting in the divine purposes of God, look forward in hope to what is yet to be. Simeon and Anna are contemplative figures who know how to welcome the new, they welcome it and celebrate it. They are free to say: “it is time to move on, time to let go.” “Now Lord, let your servant go in peace, for my eyes have seen the salvation.” They are words we sing every night in the monastery, the *nunc dimittis*, the song of letting go. Words even more fitting now, as we kiss the year goodbye and slip it into the archive of life.

But as Mary and Joseph wondered at Simeon's song of light and glory, something in his expression changed. He would rather have bitten his tongue than say it, but in such a holy place he had to speak the truth. He had seen into the distance. Not everything would work out for the child, and the Mother would experience a sword piercing her soul. Mary would have to watch that prophecy come true, and Jesus would be rejected by the very city to which he came to bring peace, and by the very people he came to save.

Today is the feast of the Holy Family, and we might imagine Mary, Joseph and the child-Jesus making their way back to Nazareth to make their home. But with mixed emotions from the words of Simeon light and glory; destiny and the sword. Bitter-sweet words: blessing and curse; life and death.

The Temple may have been Jesus's Father's house, but it would not be his earthly home. It is good to imagine that domestic life of Nazareth, fill in the picture of those silent years. Today we celebrate the "Holy Family" but I am sure that even for Mary and Joseph that holiness was not handed to them on a plate. Holiness is built amongst the give and take, the ups and downs, the blessings and curses that life presents. Sanctity begins in the family, the place where a child is protected and nurtured, but also challenged to socialize and grow.

"Meanwhile the child grew to maturity." There is a huge theological debate about that phase. What does that mean for the Son of God. Was he born perfect in every way, all-knowing, all-seeing, and was his childhood "wondrous" as we sang in the carol, and he 'mild, obedient and good.' Or did he somehow grow in his human existence? Did Mary and Joseph enjoy watching him learn through experience, grow and develop? I would like to think this was the case. If we take his humanity seriously, he like all of us, grew in his human existence. Grew, surrounded by the love of Mary and Joseph.

Real families. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs wrote: "Families are not easy places, they are full of stress. Through my parents I have a history. Through my children I have posterity. In the family I learn the complex choreography of love - what it means to give and take and share, to grow from obedience to responsibility, to learn, challenge, rebel, make mistakes, to forgive and be forgiven, to argue and make up, to win without triumph and know when to lose graciously. It is where we acquire emotional intelligence, that delicate negotiation between the given and the chosen, the things I will and the things resistant to my will."

Rabbi Sachs reminds us why the home is so important. The place where we learn the give and take of love. The place where we learn to be the social beings that God has made us to be. The home is the first school of holiness, the place we experience love and from that experience learn and grow.

*"And God's favour was with him"* the Gospel concludes. Charis, God's grace, kindness. Human maturity is not just a human struggle, but prayer comes into it: opening ourselves to the grace of God to be changed and transformed. Let us open ourselves to the grace of Christ at this Eucharist.

Eternal Word, through whom all things were made: Lord have mercy.  
True light, enlightening all men, Christ have mercy.  
Son of God, made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, Lord have mercy.