

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

How's The Family?

Christmas has become a time of testing. As the only real *feast* left in this country's wretchedly poor calendar, it is the litmus test of all we are. "*Am I enjoying Christmas?*" is a sort of vital test-question. It's the test of our income, our sociability, our friendliness, our generosity, our good taste, our love: what a lot is at stake! It would be the greatest shame to admit: *I spent Christmas alone with the dog.* There's the ultimate picture of a sad person - *alone at Christmas.*

Happy Families

Families especially are on trial. If there's a family that doesn't row at Christmas, I'd be amazed. It's a great temptation to take *the way we come through at Christmas* as a defining reality, like the way you come through your A-levels or the way you come through childbirth. To subject families to that kind of trial-by-ordeal seems to me to be unfair. After all, we're not much asked to celebrate, and there is little enough to help us. We're trained to be reliable cogs in the various big machines we belong to. Yet we expect our poor families to bear the sudden burden of becoming the focus and heart of all comfort and joy for three or four isolated days of the year. No wonder we find ourselves cracking under the strain!

Holy Families

I always try to visualise the Holy Family as a normal human one. Does our faith preclude such a thought? Far from it. You don't have to presuppose *sinfulness* in them, to think that Mary and Joseph often found it hard to be kind and sympathetic; people get tired, fail to listen or communicate attentively, become distracted, misunderstand, and in many other ways fall short of one another. Jesus was a little baby who cried when he was wakeful, and broke things when he was a toddler, and threw up at parties when something disagreed with him. I'm sure the little boy in Luke's Gospel who ran away and was found in the Temple was as capable of saying hurtful and hard things as any modern teenager, and that the family who set out to take charge of the young Jesus, "convinced he was out of his mind" in Mark's Gospel were as worried and concerned as the family of any modern delinquent. We see in the Holy Family a willingness to change and grow; Mary had to *change* before she could stand at the foot of the Cross, and receive a beloved disciple in place of her dying Son, and become a mother to him. If our families have to include real, changing and growing people, they too have to change and grow, and that's a painful process. The family of Jesus, above all others, had a

challenge to meet: one of its members was determined to fulfil the promises of God, and to move the human race forward to meet its ultimate destiny. How do you rise to *that*?

There'll Be Another One In A Minute

I suspect that the best way to do Christmas is to do New Year and Epiphany - and mid-Lent Sunday, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter and its Octave, Ascension, Pentecost, and Candlemas, Ash Wednesday, Corpus Christi, our saint's day, and as many of the others as we can find. If we didn't try to concentrate on Christmas (and have the shops not got much to answer for here?) as if we had nothing else to celebrate, we would be much better at enjoying our lives, studded with feasts as they would be, and we'd be much happier at Christmas, knowing that it is only one among many beautiful celebrations. If you inspect the *Radio Times* and search out the moments when the real Christmas gets a look-in, you will realise that Santa gets more attention than Jesus. Perhaps if we insisted on celebrating Easter properly (why is Good Friday the only Bank Holiday no-one observes?) we would be doing the country a service as well as proclaiming the Gospel. After all, feasts are there to make us happy: but they do this by reminding us what we have to rejoice over; that's what makes a feast real, and enables us to celebrate it wholeheartedly. Families are holy, when everything has been counted in, primarily because Jesus, the Son of God, was born into one. If you think your family has problems, spare a thought for that challenge!

Let The Family Grow!

The possibilities for our families are therefore endless and eternal, not limited and temporary. If we use our imagination, and stop limiting the reality of our lives by our timidity and our shame, we would glimpse the transfigured reality the family can be when one of its members is the Son of God. Let's be optimistic, and let's re-examine the marvellous blessing that the family can be. Let's celebrate it instead of putting up with it, and wish each other a happy Holy Family Day!

Fr Philip