

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY

YEAR B

In the middle of the night a young boy wakes up in a hospital bed. He feels very frightened and very alone. He is suffering intense pain. Burns cover forty per cent of his body. Someone had doused him with alcohol and then had him set on fire. He starts crying out for his mother. The nurse leaves her night-post to comfort him; she holds him, hugs him, whispers to him that the pain will go away sooner than he thinks. However nothing that the nurse does seems to lessen the boy's pain. He still cries for his mother. And the nurse is confused and angry: it was his mother who set him on fire.

The young boy's pain at being separated from his mother – even though she had inflicted such cruelty on him – was greater than the pain of his burns. That deep attachment to their mother makes separation from her the worst experience a child can undergo.

During World War II the noted child psychoanalyst Anna Freud directed three nurseries, which housed young children separated from their families.. In *War and Children* she wrote:

The war acquires relatively little significance for children so long as it only threatens their lives, disturbs their material comfort or cuts their food rations. It becomes enormously significant the moment it breaks up family life and uproots the first emotional attachments of the child within the family group. London children, therefore, were on the whole much less upset by bombing than by evacuation to the country as a protection against it.... It is a known fact that children will cling even to mothers who are continually cross and sometimes cruel to them.

The regular presence of parents is a constant assurance of safety for every young child. The family, no matter what its shortcomings, is the fundamental human connection. There are flaws in every human connection, but even the most fragile of families tend to be supportive to a young child than an institutional upbringing. No matter how much the institution cares, it can never replace the natural bond between mother and child. We know that the warm, intimate relationship the child has with his mother is essential for the growth of his inner life. This is not to underestimate the role of the father: it is simply to admit the truth that in most homes it is still the mother who feeds

and cleans the young child, keeps him warm, comforts him in distress. Above all it is the mother who is *there* for the young child.

Parents are the first teachers of love; their attachment to their children shows them that they are worthy of love, shows them how to love. It is very hard for a child to grow up without the caring support of that attachment. And Luke shows us in today's Gospel how the parents of Jesus fulfil the requirements of their religious tradition, and how the child Jesus grows in wisdom and maturity under their care.

From the mutual love between Mary and Joseph and from their love of him, the child Jesus will be schooled in love and grow in the security of their attachment to him. To know the meaning of love, Jesus will only have to consult his experience.

That love will give him the security and the freedom which will enable him to become himself, and although he is more than Mary and Joseph can ever give him, their influence on him can never be underestimated. The time will come when Jesus – like all children – must separate himself from his family to make his own way in life; but as a child he is wholly dependent on the love that is offered from his own family. That is the glory and the limit of his humanity.

In remembering the Holy Family, we look to our own family in gratitude for what we have received. The Feast of the Holy Family which we celebrate today is not an old one – it was instituted in 1921; but the Christian family has been celebrated by all who care to admit their indebtedness to it as the lively place where they were at home with God and an assortment of weird and wonderful relatives. In the Christian family we learn that God never comes alone; he is always accompanied by a legion of others who, in their own shy and halting way, show us something of his loving kindness. In the Christian family we can catch something of the God who accepts us as we are and who keeps on loving us stubbornly to the end.

None of our families is all holy; each is a mixture of all sorts of conflicts, compulsions and craziness that tests our love and forgiveness. But in the midst of all that, there is God. There is no other place to find him. It is the place where he found us.