



PASTORAL LETTER
from the
THE BISHOP OF EBBSFLEET
for the Feast of the Holy Family 2020

27 December 2020

'The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.'

Dear fathers, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:
dear Friends

As 2020 draws to its close (a year we may all want to forget but which I imagine no adult or child living through it ever will) I want to thank you all for another year of faithful witnessing to our Lord. In every parish in which this Pastoral Letter is read – as well as in your homes, schools, among your neighbours and at work – your faith and trust in Jesus *will have made a difference* to someone, even to many people. Looking back over a year dominated by the challenges of the pandemic, and now with a deepening sense of fatigue and anxiety about the future, it may not be possible to identify those moments, when your words or acts of witness to faith and to hope have brought others closer to God or to the Church. So often we don't know: but God knows, and God gives the growth to their faith.

But I want to take this opportunity, on the feast of the Holy Family, to ponder for a moment with you as fellow members of our Ebbsfleet family, on our faith for the future. Today's Gospel (at the end of this letter) tells us of the first journey as a family that Mary and Joseph made from Bethlehem. Forty days after Mary's confinement, they went the few miles to the Temple of God in Jerusalem to offer Jesus, the first-born son, to the Lord in accordance with the Jewish Law, and to receive him back into their care and protection.

There had been nothing automatic or romantic about the coming together of this family. At every stage it had been brought about *by faith*. 'Blessed is she', said Mary's cousin Elizabeth, 'who *believed* what was spoken to her by the Lord.' (Lk 1.45; cf 11.27-8). Joseph too had been visited by angels – when he realized that his betrothed was pregnant with a child he knew wasn't his own (Matt 1.18-25). The angel helped him to accept that the child's birth would be due to nothing but the power of God. No reasoning would give Joseph peace and serenity. *Only faith* put Joseph next to the mother of God, to shield her joy, to be the companion of her thinking, and to accompany her destiny which would be shaped by sorrow upon sorrow. Even within the holiest family words and acts of faith will have helped each other's growth.

But this was a unique family. Every family on earth is arranged around the *parents*, or those into whose care a child is received. The children 'belong' to those parents until adulthood. But in Mary and Joseph God arranges the family *around the Holy Child*. 'Do not be afraid Mary, for your son will be called the Son of the Most High, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' (Lk 1.30-33) 'Do not be afraid Joseph to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit and he will save his people from their sins.' (Matt 1.20-25). When at last he was born angels lit up the skies for a while. But before long there was talk of swords piercing their hearts, and carnage in Bethlehem on account of their son. God did not smooth the path of these two souls he put beside his son. 'Through all His wondrous childhood' not only did he 'love and watch the lowly maiden' but they watched and learned from him and had to exercise all their faith to believe. But what

great faith! Mary and Joseph are masters of hope-filled faith. Letting Christ be at the centre of their inner lives not just their outer lives; growing towards him; accepting God's will for themselves through him.

All this is also true of the family of the Church. It too is *arranged around this Child*, not around its authority figures: around all he accomplished by his life, death and resurrection; all he teaches us of God (*Jn 1.18*); and all he makes possible by loving us 'to the very limit' (*Jn 13.1*).

We are by no means out of the woods yet as far as the pandemic is concerned. The acute challenges it poses to our faith and hope, to justice, equality and peace, all still continue. But as we look to the Infant Child, and the family that God filled with faith and gathered round him, let us *recognize ourselves*, our Ebbsfleet family, and the wider family of the Church. Let us pray for one another that our faith *will grow* during our present difficulties; that we shall recognize and *use* every opportunity that God gives us in daily life to share faith; and that God will give us compassion and energy so that with great confidence we can *give faith* to a nation and a world struggling with so many unmanageable burdens. And let us pray too that we shall have opportunities as soon as possible in the new year – hopefully in the Chrism Masses or similar – to come together, around the Lord, to celebrate God's faithfulness to us.

May the Holy Family of Nazareth guard and direct our Ebbsfleet family and all associated with it in the coming year, and may he richly bless your homes and families too.

Yours devotedly: in Christ
Jonathan.

Readings for the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph [Year B]

Genesis 15.1-6, 21.1-3

Hebrews 11.8, 11-12, 17-19

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.' ... By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead – and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Luke 2.22-24, 39-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.' ... When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.