



CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS

Archbishop of Westminster

The Feast of the Holy Family Pastoral Letter

The stage today is somewhat crowded. Not only is it Boxing Day and the Feast of St Stephen, but it is also the Feast of the Holy Family. The Holy Family takes precedence, and rightly so. But the other two will get a mention.

The Holy Family is the first flowering of the Feast of Christmas. Our concentration on the birth of Jesus embraces Joseph and Mary too. There, in the simple circumstances of an animal's stall, the Holy Family takes shape.

This is no romantic image of family life, far from a respectable home where everything is 'just so'. We easily forget that, at the birth of Jesus, the animals were not at all cuddly and probably very smelly; and that the manger was filled not with soft hay, but scratchy straw. Yet these were the circumstances into which the Eternal Word, through whom all things are made, chose to enter our world. So let's put aside any idea that there is no connection between this Holy Family and the reality of our own home life.

Not so! We can hold this Holy Family to be a model, an inspiration, for our family life precisely because it is thoroughly human, thoroughly immersed in the same realities as ours, and thoroughly dependent on the goodness of its members, strengthened by the all-present grace of God.

In this past year, we have been giving additional thought and attention to Joseph. He emerges as a parent full of tender love. By this I mean that the love he had for the child in his care was both strong and gentle. Every parent needs this. This love does not overlook weakness and failings in a child. But it does mean never humiliating, or belittling a youngster because of his or her struggles. Such tenderness is an expression of strength. Such tenderness comes from a love that has eyes only for what is best for the young person making their way to maturity. The quiet, steadfast love of Joseph is part of what makes his family holy and is a model for holiness in our own homes too.

This parental love shown by Joseph was never possessive. Parental love is not only full of wonder at the uniqueness of the new life in their child, but also knows that the child is given as a gift to be cared for, and not a possession to be managed. In this sense, human parenthood is about letting go.

This helps us to understand the words of Jesus when he says: 'You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven'(Mt 23:9). Our Heavenly Father entrusted us to our parents. In turn he entrusts your children to you, yet always remaining Father of us all, and forever.

Now, Boxing Day. In my family life Boxing Day was always a special day. Its title that comes from opening boxes containing presents. Family presents were exchanged on Christmas Day. But on Boxing Day the circle widened. Aunts and Uncles, friends and lonely neighbours came round on

this day. And so the joy of giving and receiving was extended. We sing about Good King Wenceslaus doing just this on the Feast of Stephen!

Yes, Boxing Day is also and always the Feast of St Stephen, the first martyr. His gift, in response to the presence of Jesus amongst us in our flesh, was to give up his life in witnessing to Jesus. In the account of his martyrdom we read that, as he gave his testimony, he cried out: 'I can see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:56). For this truth, heard by his audience as gross blasphemy, he was stoned to death.

Stephen's martyrdom is also a flowering of the Feast of Christmas, for in the eyes of faith there is a close link between our birth into this world and our entry, or second birth, into the next. Christmas marks the entry of Jesus into our flesh, and Easter brings the new life of the Resurrection. As we celebrate the Nativity, St Stephen teaches us to look forward to our 'second birth', because when this life ends we have the sure hope of eternal life. For us, too, the heavens will be thrown open and we shall indeed see the Son of Man and the all-consuming glory of God, the greatest gift of all. As we celebrate the birth of Christ and the entry into heaven of St Stephen, we see again the contours of our lives and the destiny that lies before us.

The Holy Family marks out our route. Boxing Day teaches us the greater joy of giving than of receiving. St Stephen proclaims the new and heavenly birth that our Saviour comes to give us.

A happy and joyful Christmas to you all and a happy New Year.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster