

## **Pastoral Letter of Bishop Alan Williams, sm**

(Please read and/or make available at all Masses on the weekend of the 26th/27th December 2015)

### **THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

My Dear People,

This past year has seen two very significant moments in the life of the Church. The Synod on the Vocation and Mission of the Family met in Rome and we have now begun The Year of Mercy.

The Synod reminded us that the family is an "image and likeness of the Blessed Trinity", a reflection of the mystery of love which is the life of God. This essential truth can easily be lost amongst the realities and challenges experienced by many families.

During this Year of Mercy Pope Francis calls us to "gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives". Mercy is a fundamental attribute of God but it is also often missing in human relationships whether within families or in the wider human community.

During this year Pope Francis asks all of humanity, those of faith and those without, to walk forward into a new world- a world transformed by the mercy of God and mankind.

During these days of Christmastide we have been gazing upon the newborn infant Saviour. Jesus Christ is the human face of God- quite simply, the closer we are to Jesus the closer we are to God.

On this Feast of the Holy Family therefore we are consoled and encouraged by the scene at Bethlehem as Mary and Joseph gather around the newborn Son of God. We hope and pray that the blessings and consolations of the Holy Family will be ours during this Christmas season.

Of course we must never forget that Jesus and His family lived in the real world of which we are very aware. Today's Gospel tells us of a lost child- the twelve years old Jesus has gone missing during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Understandably, His parents are anxious and troubled even when Jesus reassures them, "Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs"? During the life and ministry of Jesus there were many other occasions of difficulty and conflict which were healed by the mercy and love which Christ alone brings.

You will recall the occasion when Jesus used the image of a family to teach us about our lives, our struggles and the redemption that is possible if we turn towards God. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son there is discord between the younger son and his father and brother. I will return repeatedly to this parable during the Year of Mercy; let me simply note here that transformation is only possible by the Father's mercy.

During this Year of Mercy we all need to make the journey of the prodigal son and daughter. Only when we experience the mercy of God ourselves can we be merciful to others- "Merciful like the Father".

I wish you many blessings over Christmas and into the New Year. We can all too easily lose sight of Christ our Redeemer; in today's Gospel Mary and Joseph lost Jesus but found Him again. During this Year of Mercy "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan, sm  
Bishop of Brentwood