

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

A friend of mine once said; the most challenging question you can ask or be asked is the question 'why'. Why do you do what you do, or why don't you do what might be thought necessary? Why do you believe or why do you not believe? Why is there suffering in the world, why is there hunger, war, violence? The question 'why' can be asked again and again and it goes deep into our inner selves.

In the Gospel today, we hear that Jesus asked questions in order that he might understand. He stayed in the Temple listening to the doctors of the law and asking them questions. The elders were astounded at his intelligences and his replies. However, the first person to ask the question 'why' was Mary.

Jesus' parents, on discovering that he was not with the caravan were understandably distressed. Like any parents that have lost a child they probably panicked and thought of all the worst possibilities that could have happened to him. They might never see him again; he might be injured; he might be dead. They go back to Jerusalem searching for him and when they find Jesus in the Temple they are overcome with emotion. Mary asks her son; 'my child why have you done this to us? See how worried your Father and I have been looking for you'. Their relief must have been great. One can imagine Mary asking; Why didn't you tell us that you wanted to stay in Jerusalem, why have you caused us this distress? The question 'why' is very understandable. Today parents still ask their children why have you done this to us when their children have put them in a place of worry and fear. At these times parents need the support of others and those others may well be us. As the Family of God, we have a responsibility to accompany one another in times of distress as well as happiness.

Jesus' reply to his mother seemed callous. It is the second 'why' of today's Gospel 'why were you looking for me'? The answer is obvious – he is their child and they love him. Does Jesus not appreciate this? But he goes on to say 'did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs'. We are told that Mary and Joseph did not understand their son, nor the reason for the pain he had inflicted upon them. After this incident they returned home to Nazareth where Jesus grew into adulthood. Mary stores up these things in her heart. She remembers them and tries to understand.

The question put by Jesus 'why are you looking for me' is a question for all of us to ponder. Why do we look for Jesus? Why do we listen to his word and seek his presence? Why do we fail to do so? Why do we turn away from him when we have celebrated his birth this Christmas season? At the beginning of Advent we entered into the Diocesan Year of Prayer. During the past year we have been reflecting on what it means to be missionary disciples. We are sent into the world to be the sign of Christ's presence today. We can only be that presence if we know Christ. We are called to let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home within us. Sometimes we understand that message and other times like Mary and Joseph and like the later disciples of Jesus, we fail to understand immediately. We need to live with the question 'why' in order that we can understand and more fully enter in to the mystery of God, the Kingdom of God and our vocation within it.

Through prayer we come to know Jesus as the Christ. Through prayer we are enabled to answer the question 'why are you looking for me'. We grow in our answers. Our prayer should be Christ centred, pondering on the person of Jesus, doing so this year particularly through the Gospel of St Luke. Jesus leads us into the life of the Trinity and into communion with Mary, Joseph and all the Saints. We are accompanied by their prayers as well as the prayers of one another.

As we start a New Year I would like to wish you every blessing and may the face of the Lord shine upon you and your families. In the next few years we will have to face challenges which will call us to a new understanding of what it means to be the Church. This is due to a changing world and the reality of a smaller number of priests. This will effect parish life. We are a people of Hope, trusting in God, open to the Holy Spirit, believing that God is present with us and leading us along paths that may be new and challenging but are also life giving.

With my best wishes and prayers,

Rt Rev Declan Lang
Bishop of Clifton