



**PASTORAL LETTER OF THE MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY, 29 DECEMBER 2013**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you.

Over Christmas I was blessed to have members of my family staying with me in Birmingham. The presence and company of my father and aunt reminded me of my earliest experiences of family life as we recalled memorable family occasions and numerous Christmases past. These experiences have an impact on the formation of our character and they help to shape our expectations from life as it unfolds.

At Christmas we have been celebrating a divine mystery revealed to us in the ordinary circumstances of the life of a family. The Incarnation is a sublime exchange in which God becomes man so that our humanity can be drawn deeper and deeper into the life of God. Our human nature was created from the beginning with an openness towards God but we needed God to reach out and heal us for his image to be complete within us.

The extraordinary truth of Christmas is that all of this has taken place within a setting that is familiar to us and in the humblest of circumstances. The people God chose to be his own were not any of the magnificent empire-builders of history, but a small nation on the trade routes between East and West who were chosen to receive the revelation of God's presence among them.

Within his people Israel it wasn't from among the powerful or influential that God identified a family for his Son Emmanuel, but it was a poor girl who was capable of great love that God invited to become the mother of his Son. The family setting for Jesus' birth was the loving and trusting relationship between Mary and Joseph and the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves from the outset.

This teaches us something about the unfathomable humility of God, that the maker and ruler of all that exists should choose to come among us in a setting that had such apparent disadvantages. God's wisdom is echoed in the insights of St Paul who could say *when I am weak then I am strong*. (2 Corinthians 12:10) The story of the Holy Family is full of encouragement for those who struggle in life – especially in their family life – and it enables us to see that true riches lie within our relationships and not in our abilities or possessions.

Those bonds of love that held Jesus, Mary and Joseph together as a family formed the first human relationships that the Word-made-flesh would know. Like all of us Jesus was shaped in his expectations of life and in his outlook towards others by what he heard and saw as a child at home. We learn much about his own family from our Lord's teaching and in his attitudes towards a wide range of people.

In Mary and Joseph our Lord came to understand what it means to love God above all things and to love our neighbour as ourselves. His family was a place of prayerful trust in God and of welcome to those in need. His home was a sanctuary of God's presence and also a school that taught him how to reverence and cherish other human beings. Through the loving example of his parents our Lord's way of understanding the world around him was formed and he discovered significant channels of communicating the grace of forgiveness that he was sent to pour out upon the world.

Despite the hardships that surrounded the birth of their child Mary and Joseph did not grow cynical or suspicious of the world around them and they communicated this generous outlook in their family life. Jesus grew up looking for goodness in others because he had first experienced this search for goodness within his own family. From within his family our Lord began to show the depths of the Father's love: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.* (John 3:16)

Today offers an opportunity for me to thank all our parents for the generous love with which you welcomed your children into the world - sometimes in difficult or even unpromising circumstances – and for your dedication as their first and foremost educators in the ways of faith and of faithful living. From you they learn what it means to express gratitude and to show mercy and forgiveness.

The preparations for next year's Synod of Bishops on the pastoral challenges of the family have highlighted some of the difficulties faced by families today. The example of the Holy Family and their experiences of misunderstanding and rejection remind us of the need for understanding and compassion - especially for those who have experienced a break-down of family life or who may have become estranged from their closest relatives.

The family of the parish must always offer a place of welcome for those who no longer find themselves in stable or conventional family situations. As a New Year beckons we should be slow to judge and quick to embrace those who are afraid to cross the threshold of the Church because they fear they are not perfect. It was surely his own experience of family life that enabled our Lord to see that *it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.* (Luke 5:31)

The Holy Family embraces us, with all our imperfections, so that we may long for and find healing and perfection in Christ. May the Holy Family of Nazareth inspire and encourage us to be true to Christ and to reflect his mercy in the world and in our own family homes. *Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you.*

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Bernard
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 22 December 2013 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on 28/29 December 2013