

Family, Faith and Our World
Homily of December 28, 2003
by Fr. Brian Joyce

This weekend we celebrate the feast of The Holy Family. The feast of The Holy Family is a great celebration and a great model of what we are all about. But that doesn't just mean the traditional family model, whether you mean the threesome of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the Bethlehem cave, or the modern U.S. traditional family model of one father, one mother, and 1.6 children. The human family is far more varied and complex than that, and things are not always easy in real life.

I think all of you have probably at least heard of the book that was the best seller a number of years ago by the Rabbi Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Well, I was flying across the country recently and the man next to me was reading a new book which may well become a best seller. Its title was, "When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People." You can even see it in today's gospel when Joseph is saying to Mary, "I thought he was with you" and Mary is saying, "Well, he was supposed to be with you." It's not always easy being family. It's not always easy.

And it is a struggle that we all have, to become one family. That is at the heart of what we are all about. In fact, not only is it what the human race is all about, becoming one family, but I think it is what our Planet Earth is about and our entire Universe is about, becoming one family. It was interesting, last week, when the first earthquake hit in Paso Robles (6.5) and one in Iran was 6.5 also. One seismologist, expert on earthquakes, was interviewed, and he became almost poetic in talking about what was going on in terms of the earth. He was not referring to the tragic loss, the destruction and the loss of life, but what he was referring to was the insight that earthquakes give us about the makeup of our world, and maybe about what we are all about. He said that when you look at the earth, it is almost as if the earth already knows something that we have yet to learn, that we are interconnected, that we are interdependent, that we are called to be one family. He said, "When that earthquake struck in Paso Robles, 6.5, it was not just some energy being released and pressure released. It was not just a slippage in one fault. At that moment, every grain of sand on the Planet Earth danced and the whole planet was rung like a single bell."

God is at work, from the first flaring forth of creation, which some scientists say happened fifteen billion years ago (The more recent estimate is 13.7 billion years ago.) But from the beginning, God is at work, walking with us and drawing us together. At least, in some ways and some of the time, our planet seems aware of this and in tune with this, even when we are not. Our own being out of tune with what the planet and the Universe is all about, our own being out of harmony is signalled by words such as Iraq, and Palestine and Northern Ireland, and terrorism

and high security alert and detention. As a race, we are called to be one family, as a human race. More often, we have it confused with being a tribe. A tribe is driven to exclude others and to see anyone different as the enemy. But we are called to be one family. Perhaps the scene of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, solitary and alone, just the three of them, in the Bethlehem cave, and what a difference it made for the world, might remind us that God always wants us to begin in small ways, and to begin with ourselves.

I think you are all familiar with the name Garrison Keeler and Lake Wobegon and his stories. He is one of our great American story tellers. In one of his Lake Wobegon stories, he pictures Christmas in his old home town. "All the exiles return," he says. That's what he calls them, "exiles." All the people who left the little community to make it big in the world out there, and maybe like some of our visitors and family, come back this Christmas, and he begins telling stories about each of them. He says,

"Corinne Inquest drives in from Minneapolis. She is a schoolteacher now. On the back seat of her car, she has a stack of essays to grade over the holidays. She is listening to a radio preacher along the way and she gets so upset with his sermon that she argues theology with him. All the while her speed is increasing while her anger is rising.... until she notices the flashing lights of a Minnesota Highway trooper right behind her.

Eddie, the jealous boy, comes home. He is so jealous about his good-looking wife that, when he glances up from trying to put together a Christmas toy for his son and he can't find Eunice, he runs outside without a coat, thinking that she might be sitting in the warming house at the skating rink, with her brother-in-law, Fred.

Richard comes home. They called him "Foxy" in high school days, always out to make a buck, always swaggering about how he was going to be rich one day. Well, he is a millionaire now, drives home in his custom made pink automobile, telling tales of his houses and travels and conquests.

They all come home for Christmas. And some of them go to church with their aging parents, and some of them don't. Yet, somehow, as they are forced to face the old hometown and as they are confronted again by who they are and what they have become, there is a sort of wistfulness that sets in. 'You see,' Garrison Keeler says, 'they all believe in themselves.' They all believe in their looks or in their skills or in their luck. They all believe, but here's the crunch of Christmas. As they see the old farmhouses again and as they talk to their wrinkled grandparents, and as they walk the streets that now seem so short and small, they wonder to themselves. They wonder in their hearts if they have chosen the right gods."

Billy Joel really became famous through his first hit, "Piano Man," and it is the story about his days playing at a piano bar and getting to know the stories of all the people who came and went. He tells about the man who came up to him and said, "Son, can you play me a melody? I am not

really sure how it goes, but it is sad and it's sweet and it sounded complete when I wore a younger man's clothes."

The point of all these stories is that everybody has faith. Everybody believes. And the challenge in our lives comes when we find out that what we believe, what we really believe, has begun to shape us. It has begun to alter us. It has begun to change us. And then we look back and we look in the mirror and we say, "Is this the meaning of my life? What have I become? I remember, I used to sing a different song. What happened to me?... What happened to me?" And I think the power of Christmas is to bring us back home, and not in the sense of home as our street address, but home in the sense of who we really are, who we really are called to be, a home that asks whether we have chosen the right gods along the way.

Christmas not only asks that question of us, but it suggests the answer. It asks the question, "What happened to me?" But it gives the answer, whatever happened, wherever we are in our journey in life, whatever we have become, whatever our motive for being here. There is a God so madly in love with us that God could not leave a distance between us but had to come and dwell among us and take our human condition, and not only teach us to live by compassion and forgiveness and self-sacrifice, but actually personally just show us how to do it.

Christmas forces us to ask some deep questions, but also provides some deep answers. The answer that the love of God and the presence of God calls us to be one family that is rung like a bell by the unconditional love of God, calls us to remember that no matter who is hurt in the world or needy or rejoicing or filled with hope or celebrating, that we are called to dance to God's melody of compassion, of forgiveness, of joy, of hope, of justice, and of peace. Amen.