

Homily The Feast of the Holy Family Year B (31.12.17)

'Eat McCain's oven chips, and happiness will be yours!'

In the Christmas season I make a point of watching the adverts on telly, because they change them at Christmas time, and I like to see what message is being given. And there was a great message recently, about what makes for a really contented family life. I don't know whether you saw it, I'm pretty sure it was a McCain's chips advert. It started showing all the people smiling with lovely, happy faces, around the dinner table. The message was - families come in all different shapes and sizes - some have a mum and a dad, some have a mum only, some have a dad, some have two mums, some have two dads, some have different children from different families joining onto another family. The great message was - McCain chips brings all types of families together at Christmas. There you are, you have the answer: Just buy McCain's chips and your families will be happy. That's the sermon!

[laughter]

But what it did bring home to me, in reality, was that life isn't tidy, is it? You see that at one level the Church puts forward to us the Holy Family as a sort of template of family life, and yet, obviously, we're not meant to copy them in a literal sense, because no two families are the same. You can't become a plaster cast copy of another family whom you might like to emulate. So it has to be something else, because all life's untidy and, actually, if you dig a bit deeper with the Holy Family, they were untidy. When Mary got pregnant, Joseph said he was going to divorce her informally so as to save her any embarrassment. I mean, that wasn't very tidy, was it? Joseph thought Mary had been with another man, but being a just man, Joseph wanted to spare her. Obviously, we don't have details of all the troubles they went through in living in that era, but clearly, there wasn't a script and it wasn't always tidy.

But I think the real issue is the word "holy" in today's feast, and that's the real message of today's readings. Because if you scour the whole of the Old Testament you will find that the word "holy" is actually just reserved for God. He is the Holy One. There's nobody else 'holy' as such. It is a prerogative and an attribute of God Himself, but where they do speak of the holy people of God, or holiness in the New Testament in particular, the implication is always that they/we share in the holiness of God, they/we touch the hem of the garment of God - there's some close proximity to God - and something of the holiness of God radiates through a holy person. It's not their holiness though, it's God's. For me, that teaches us that our families, no matter what shape or untidiness they come in should strive to be holy - to have a place for God, in the busyness, and untidiness of our lives. The virtues that the Holy Family teaches are about being holy to God, because Joseph and

Mary were children of Abraham, as it said there in that first reading, and Abraham wasn't a tidy person.

I like how the church hides the naughty text from you in the lectionary, Abraham had a concubine, so he wasn't very tidy, was he? And he had a child to her too, but this is the message that Abraham changed his way of life eventually because of touching the holiness of God. And Mary and Joseph are touched by the holiness of God, and the virtues of family life, of course, are expressed beautifully by that second reading. (Sorry you got that Abraham one first, I meant to move the page back, but it was my fault, but it worked out handy, as it happens.) The virtues that St. Paul speaks about are the virtues of family life in the Church, about putting on compassion and so on -all the things that make for humanity and for creating out of our children, thoroughly whole and entire and integrated human beings. If you looked at that reading and said, if you could give your children those gifts - kindness, gentleness, patience, and the ability to say sorry and to forgive - then what a family life you would have, and indeed, it's those sorts of attributes that we look to the Holy Family for - the attributes we want for our lives, in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves in.