

Although I sat down to write this sermon more than a week before Christmas, at the time I felt confident enough of my powers of empirical observation through fi(cough)two odd years of life to know that by the time I delivered it to you I would with absolute certainty have seen the first TV advert of the season for Slimfast, Weight watchers or gym membership. And I have. On Christmas day itself no less.

It is just inevitable that as soon as the first part of Christmas lunch has hit the duodenum, some killjoy marketeer is going to want to be reminding us of that iron-fast rule of the festive season: what goes in must go on. Even if you eat it standing up. No real surprise that weight gain is so common an experience. It might be one of our deep desires to have our cake and eat it, but we always settle for the 'eat it' half of that equation, usually with pretty sprinkly bits on top and liberal doses of squirty cream. No point trying to blame God: he might have given us the appetites, but it's we who don't know when to stop. No, piling on the pounds is just one of those things that we expend an enormous amount of effort trying to avoid, pointlessly as it happens, because it is really one of the entirely unavoidable components of life. Like it or not, they will all come our way: death, taxes, emotions, mistakes, pain, the common cold, weight gain, ageing and family. Family. Forget the worry of putting on a few pounds, now there's a really weighty word to take your mind off it.

That word may have fewer rose-tinted connotations for you right now than it did a few days before Christmas: by this stage of the proceedings the kids have been off school long enough to ensure that your nerves are not merely frayed, but something resembling delicate Chantilly lace that the cat's been using as a scratching post; you've spent enough time with Uncle Blank and Cousin So and So to understand from the inside why the extended family is seriously out of vogue; you know you don't get to choose your family, but after near on a week of them up-close and partying you're fairly certain that if you did have a choice, it wouldn't be them, not even if they were the last ones left in the bottom of the box; and best not to even mention in-laws: 'family' might not be the most welcome word in your lexicon right this time.

But here at St Mary's, we are having none of that. Oh no. We really want to rub your nose in it, because not only is today the first Sunday of Christmas, it is also the feast of the Holy Family.

We like our family here at St Mary's. If you go to our web site you'll find prominently displayed the statement 'St Mary's is an inclusive, friendly, family, worshipping

community in the liberal Catholic tradition of the Church of England.' We like our family.

But we're also something of a feisty lot and don't sit back and take it for granted-well you lot don't- so when someone says 'today is the feast of the Holy Family' we will immediately want to ask 'What does family mean?', and more to the point, 'What exactly does it mean to be Holy Family?'

Well the first thing we can say is that it's not going to be the standard issue nuclear family that gets all those family-values fruitcakes dewy-eyed and defensive. And I don't think it's going to help us any to say a lot about that very famous Holy Family, your neighbours in Nazareth, because those Christians for whom the husband, wife and 2.2 children is totemic tend to get a bit upset if you get all gooey eyed and sentimental about a family where the husband is several decades older than his wife, (tut) who is herself a teenager (tut, tut), who conceived her child out of wedlock (tut, tut, tut), and to a different father to the man she eventually married (red faced frothy mouthed apoplectic all-caps TUT). Suffice to say looking at *that* particular family, that God does not have any rigid recipe for what makes any family, one of these, one of those, this age and that, a tablespoon of the other- never mind a formula for a holy one.

Amazingly, what makes a Holy Family, is not the requisite number of correct members from this category or that, but something else altogether, something that can make a holy family look very different indeed to any cosy Victorian fantasy or Daily Mail suburban stereotype. From the outside, it might not look anything like a family at all, from the outside it might look like you're having a larf. Its more a script than a prescription and today, St Paul shows us what it looks like.

I know I'm throwing this scripture out to you a second time today, and quite a lot of it, but it is worth really hearing what has been read:

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns,*

*and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*

That's what a Holy Family looks like. No other attributes are necessary: the constituents of that family could be, well pretty much almost anybody and pretty much almost everybody: no place here for arbitrary membership criteria, just the one thing necessary, the desire to love Jesus. This holy family *might* look like a textbook domestic family but it doesn't have to: it might look like a religious community, or if we're really lucky, our church might look like that.

I said earlier that our church web site does prominently feature the word 'Family', but it doesn't (I think) say 'family friendly' or 'standing up for the family values' or anything like that: it says simply 'Family'. Now, you might raise an eyebrow if it looks like I am claiming that this church family is Paul's kind, humble, gentle and patient, forbearing, forgiving and loving community, especially if you've ever sat on PCC. Very often your church family is to all intents and purposes as dysfunctional as the most ASBO-rich antisocial clan. It can be. But because we are not born into this family, because we choose to be part of it, we know what the rules are, what the membership criteria are, where we should be trying to be, even if we're not quite all the way there just now. And so working together, sewn together in the clothes of love, we can make our own Holy Family.

Blood is thicker than water, and spirit is richer than either. Most of us here are not related to each other in the usual, biological family way, but Jesus has *called us together as parts of one body*. He has give us each identical spiritual genes. Children of the same heavenly Father. We *are* family. There's a song in there somewhere. If only I could remember the tune...