

# The True Holy Family

a sermon preached on the

## Feast of the Holy Family

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at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 2:10-16; Matthew 2:13-23

'Family' is a word and concept loaded with freight. Probably this has always been so, but in our time 'family' has come to bear an impossible burden. The family of both marketing construction and moralising religion is fundamentally tribal. Christmas is both comforting and searing for us because it is a social construction from which we derive our identity and security on the basis of our tribe, generally starting with what we have come to call the 'nuclear family', a very modern construction. The boundaries of 'family' can be extended to those who are not blood related but who we treat as family, to a close-knit group of neighbours, to towns, to religious groups – and as wide as provinces and nations, as the economics and sociology of sport amply demonstrates. Part of New Zealand's strength as a nation is the sense of being a close family.

Christmas is the social construction of belonging to 'family', in one guise or another. The great December migration and \$2 billion worth of retail sales is the practical enactment of family religion. Little wonder Christmastime is joyful for some but excruciating for others, for it is made to bear an impossible freight of tribal identity.

Family for Jesus is an entirely different matter altogether. Time and again the Jesus revolution is emasculated and reversed and sabotaged by religion, and this is most serious in the case of the modern preoccupation with family religion – whether of the marketing variety, or of the Vatican and flat-earth Protestant type which reduces morality to personal sexuality.

The true 'holy family', by contrast to these tragic distortions, is those hear the word of God and do it.<sup>1</sup> The holy family, that is to say, represents a movement of earth-turning proportions – what scientists call a paradigm shift. Tribal narrowness – whether comfortable or searing – is repudiated by Jesus, who ushers in the new paradigm. His family are those who meditate upon the word of God and do it. His family are those who leave their work, who set down their ploughs and leave their counting tables and follow him.<sup>2</sup> His family are those who drink his cup.<sup>3</sup> His family are those who love their enemies and bless those who persecute them.<sup>4</sup> The true holy family consists of those who go the extra mile, who turn the other cheek, who forgive seventy times seven, who eat with tax collectors and sinners, who give away what is most precious to them.<sup>5</sup> His brother and his mother are the ones who stand at the foot of the cross.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the holy family is the family that is no longer defined by tribal boundaries of any kind. The holy family is the family of all humankind, the repudiation of all tribalism – nuclear family, national identity, ethnic purity, religious righteousness, colour, gender, sexuality, and any of the other deadly means by which we have managed to carve up humankind. In Christ, St Paul declared, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.<sup>7</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recognising the inherent evil and regressiveness of national tribalisms, Teilhard de Chardin declared that "the age of nations has passed."<sup>8</sup> Of course, Teilhard's bold assertion is like St Paul's, for we know that the tribal

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<sup>1</sup> This is a well-attested teaching of Jesus: Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 8:21. The Johannine parallel offers a further insight into the nature of kinship: John 15:14

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:62

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 20:22

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:39,41; Matthew 18:21-22; 19:21

<sup>6</sup> John 19:26-27

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>8</sup> Teilhard de Chardin P, "The Spirit of the earth", in *Human Energy*, London: William Collins, 1969, p37.

prejudices of national identity remain as powerful as the tribalisms of sexual identity, ethnic identity, colour identity, and so on.

The fact that tribalism is not yet dead should not surprise us, however, for this is the work of evolution, which takes the course of millennia. In spite of what may seem like slow progress, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ represents the defining turning point in human evolution. Paradigm shifts are always met with fantastic resistance. The holy family, Jesus' followers now know, nevertheless, can no longer be tribal. The holy family, the new creation forged in the crucible of crucifixion-resurrection, the fulfilment of all the law and prophets, is the new universal humanity, those who are made one in God through the sacrifice of Christ. The holy family, that is to say, is that humanity which has suffered through the collapse of tribal securities and broken through to an entirely new evolutionary development. Christ is the 'new Adam' because he is the pioneer, the fulfilment and epitome of the new post-tribal humanity, he is the completion of humankind as a consequence of suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Today's gospel warns us that this discipleship, this evolution of our new humanity, this paradigm shift, will not be welcomed by tribal authorities – neither the external tyrants, nor those oppressors buried deep within our own psyches, those bitter, jealous and fearful aspects of ourselves which experienced abandonment, disillusionment and suffering at the hands of our fallible nuclear families. Events this week in Pakistan remind us starkly of the outer fact. Our own conflicts, paranoia and jealousies remind us starkly of the inner fact. The new post-tribal humanity will always be threatened with annihilation, by Herods both without and within.<sup>10</sup> But as Matthew's narrative also promises, the new humanity will also be protected, guided by angels, by that unstoppable Divine impetus towards the new humanity in which we come to completeness.<sup>11</sup>

We participate in Christ's new humanity only through suffering our own evolutionary development, the suffering which is the inevitable consequence of the tribal families' foibles and failings we inherit, and the fearful resistances without and within. Discipleship of Jesus, the true holy family, symbolised and enacted in the sacrament of his Body and Blood, is the voluntary and open-eyed willingness to suffer the evolution of our own humanity, past the limitations and grief and pride of our familial and tribal boundaries into the new universal humanity. Like St Paul and Teilhard's bold assertions, we too make our own bold assertion about the true holy family, our true humanity, at this and every eucharist: "We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. We who are many are one body, for we all share in the one bread."<sup>12</sup>

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 2:10

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:16

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 2:12, 13, 19

<sup>12</sup> *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, Auckland: William Collins Publishers, 1989, p425.