

Diocese of Clifton

Bishop Declan Lang's Pastoral Letter for the Feast of the Holy Family:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

At this time of year families, who are often living in all parts of the country and even spread throughout the world, try to get together to celebrate Christmas. Family life is celebrated and love between family members is renewed and deepened. Despite the tensions and arguments that sometimes arise we know family life to be precious and important. A recent opinion poll carried out for the BBC, showed that 96% of those questioned said that their family life was important to them. Just under 75% said they felt happiest when they were at home.

Today's feast of the Holy Family reminds us that the home is a holy place. For most people the home is where we first experience being loved and learn to love. Loving relationships are what make us holy – whole people. It is in love that we discover our humanity, our true identity. It is in loving and being loved that we discover the risks of loving, the challenge to our selfishness, but also the way in which love sets us free and enables us to flourish. Like Mary at Bethlehem, Christmas is a time to ponder our loving relationships and grow in their mystery. Christmas is a time to say thank you to those who love us.

The birth of Jesus is about God loving us. Each one of us is loved by God unconditionally. The Word of God became flesh so that we might know that God is with us. Jesus is Emmanuel a name that means God is with us. God is on our side and God is present with us in our loving and being loved. God is love. We are made in the image and likeness of love and our hearts will not rest until we live fully in the love that God has for us.

The love of God opens our horizons so we become aware that our relationships are not restricted to our immediate families. We have friends who are very important to us and who play a significant part in our lives. But we are also part of the human family. All people are my brothers and sisters and together we are called to have a concern for one another. Christmas also reminds us of this truth and finds expression in our willingness to support various charities.

Recently our horizons have further widened to realise that when we talk about home we are talking about more than human relationships. The

whole area of ecology is about the relationships we have with the rest of creation. God created all things and God holds the whole of creation in love. In Christ all things are made new.

The word “ecology” comes from the Greek root “oikos” meaning “home”. The earth is our home and like all homes we have a responsibility for its well being. Our earth home is faced with various threats: the pollution of land, water and air, the destruction of the rainforests, the erosion of soil, the loss of sources of fresh water, the spread of deserts, the alarming rate of species extinction, global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer.

Pope Benedict has recently reminded us that the world (our home) is not something indifferent, raw material to be utilized simply as we see fit. The world is part of God’s plan and we have been entrusted with it, not to exploit it, but to care for it as God cares for the whole of creation.

If we are allowing the “message of Christ in all its richness to find a home within us”, the life of love we live must not only be about the love we have for one another but also the loving concern we have for the world in all its wonder.

The angels proclaimed a message of peace - a harmony of relationships which means we are called to be at one with God, one another and the whole of God’s creation. As we approach a new year we ask the Lord to bless us and enable us to enter more deeply into the mystery of life. Entering into that mystery we enter more fully into the life of God whose presence is reflected in all that God has made.

I wish you all many blessings during this Christmas season and for 2009.

With my best wishes and prayers,

Bishop Declan Lang

Bishop of Clifton

To be read and / or made available in all Churches and Chapels in the Clifton Diocese on the Feast of the Holy Family 27 / 28 December 2008