

Being a shepherd in the Middle East in the time of Jesus was a demanding way of life. One had to have a certain toughness as well as strength and courage in order to deal with the constant threat of predatory animals as well as the extremes of weather and the long night vigils. For the original readers of the Gospel, the last people they would have thought of as recipients of a vision of angels were shepherds. That they were the first to hear of the birth of Jesus, and to hear it from an angel is one of many surprises surrounding the first Christmas. The greatest surprise of all was that the Christ, the anointed of God, would come into the world as the child of such apparently very ordinary parents.

“I am bringing you good news of great joy,” the angel declares to the shepherds, “to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.” For a moment, darkness gives way to light as “the glory of the Lord shone around them. They hear a chorus of angels singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favours.”

The passage we read a moment ago from the prophet Isaiah, whatever its original meaning, came to be understood as pointing forward to an ideal king who would one day come from God and bring about the triumph of God’s kingdom. Its opening lines play on the theme of light and darkness. “The people who walked in

darkness,” the prophet declares, “have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone.”

All of us at different times experience the kind of darkness of which the prophet speaks. It might be provoked by the serious illness of a spouse, or the loss of a job, or physical or psychological difficulties of a child, or the ravages of old age. At such moments, we find ourselves in the dark with little sense of where to turn. We have a similar feeling when we look at the world around us and see the anger, hatred and violence that seem so widespread today, or as we think about our collective failure to respond adequately to challenges of poverty, refugees and climate change. On top of that, many people in various parts of the globe are experiencing or will experience the darkness of terror, oppression and war.

“I am the light of the world,” Jesus once said. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Faith in Jesus and in what God has done for us in him does not change the reality of the personal and social challenges we face, but it can, as the Scriptures put it, “guide our feet into the way of peace.”

“A child has been born for us, a son has been given to us,” Isaiah declares. “He is named Prince of Peace.” Light and peace are inseparable from joy. “You

have multiplied the nation,” the prophet affirms, “you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest.”

Some of the most intense experiences of joy that we can have as humans are associated with the birth of a child. For mothers, especially, but also for many fathers, there is little in life that can compare with it. We know that life can be difficult and that every life will be marked by some degree of pain and failure as well as by much that is positive. Even when we know that, the birth of child is still able to fill us with joy and hope.

Of all human births, none has had a greater impact on our lives and on the life of the world than that of Jesus. In him, God has come among us in a way that speaks to us in order to reconcile us to himself and to reveal to us the path upon which we are called to walk. In celebrating the birth of Jesus, we are celebrating his life and all that it means for us in terms of forgiveness and peace, love and mercy.

May our Christmas celebration this year, whatever form it takes, be for us and for our families an experience of light, peace and joy. May it deepen our faith and hope in the face of so much in the world that threatens to undermine them.

Most of us probably think more about, and have greater contact with, our family at this time of the year than at any other. Some travel great distances to be with parents or siblings, children or grandchildren. Family gatherings of whatever kind provide us with opportunities to exchange news and to reinforce family relationships and feelings. For some people, unfortunately, the experience is a negative one. Ancient misunderstandings and conflicts are reawakened and sometimes reinforced.

Although today's liturgy is dedicated to the Holy Family, most of the key moments of the Christmas period touch on the theme of family. Mary gives birth to her child and embarks on the gratifying, mysterious and challenging task of motherhood. The incident in today's gospel and the anxiety and lack of comprehension it reflects can be taken as an example of what surely recurred more than once in the relationship between Jesus and his parents.

Although Joseph tends to be in the background of Luke's account of the conception, birth and early childhood of Jesus, Matthew, in his account, focuses on him. He shows that Joseph had to struggle to understand what was taking place. Once he did, however, he showed himself to be a strong and loving presence to his wife and child and a trusting and obedient servant of God. It was

his responsibility to protect them from the threats of Herod and to bring them eventually to Nazareth, where he reportedly worked as a carpenter in order to provide them with the necessities of life.

Today's feast invites us to think about our families, to think about the good things in them for which we should be grateful and to reflect on how we might enhance and strengthen them for the benefit of the family as a whole.

Contemporary families are marked by enormous variety. There is no one pattern, no single ideal, of what constitutes a family today. One of the more challenging aspects of our culture for families is the enormous emphasis it puts on the individual. I sometimes have the impression that aspects of the way we live and entertain ourselves foster narcissism. We are constantly encouraged to focus on the self with the result that everyone else is assigned a secondary role in our lives. Such an attitude can be devastating for marriages and families.

As a celibate priest, I feel quite inadequate when it comes to talking about the family. I came out of a family, which, while not ideal, was stable and supportive. I have always thought of my father as a kind of Joseph figure.

Over the years, I have come to know a number of families and have been deeply impressed by the dedication, love and commitment that have marked so

many of them. People struggle with sickness, job loss, and worries and concerns about children. With children, the issue can involve such things as health, disabilities of one kind or another, education and different phases like adolescent rebellion. Many parents can identify with Mary's lament in today's gospel. "Child," she says to Jesus, "why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety."

There is a phrase in one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which, I believe, is rich in possibilities for family life. "The family," it says, "is the domestic church." Although the phrase is open to more than one interpretation, for me it says that what church is all about – the gifts that are at its heart, the way of life it tries to inspire in us– are meant to enrich and foster family life.

What that means concretely is that what Jesus teaches about such things as forgiveness, compassion, mercy and love should be put into practice above all in our families.

The apostle Paul has many passages in his letters in which he talks about the life of all Christians and perhaps especially their life together. In an alternative text for today's second reading, he encourages us to "clothe (ourselves) with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another,"

he says, “and if any one has a complaint against another, forgive each other

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Such attitudes, values, virtues – whatever we call them – transcend cultural and individual differences. They speak to our hearts, to what defines us as human beings. Our challenge is, with God’s help, to make them come alive in our lives and especially in the life of our family.