



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary & Joseph Year C

Choose life not death

Readings: 1 Samuel 1: 20-22, 24-28, Ps 84: 2-3, 5-6, 9-10, 1 John 3: 1-2, 21-24, Luke 2: 41-52

In ancient times the Feast of the Nativity lasted a full forty days and terminated with Candlemass. (In our house it still does).

Today we read the Gospel of Candlemass and encounter two of the most attractive characters of the New Testament narrative, Simeon & Anna.

The one is guided to the Temple by the Holy Spirit.

The other never leaves the place, constantly at prayer. Both recognise the Christ Child and the return of the Presence to the holy place. One makes prophesies that will both encourage and haunt Our Lady from the Flight into Egypt to the awful climax on the hill of Golgotha. The other announces to all who will listen, the good news of the advent of the Messiah.

The Feast of the Holy Family has begun. Today it is celebrated, if at all, in the ruins of Christendom, in a culture hostile to the very idea of family and societal coherence and commonality. The domestic news over the festive season has been dominated by an array of challenges to the idea of family as central to the coherence of our civilisation. I only have time to look at one of these tonight.

First off was the headline grabbing announcement by Dame Esther Rantzen that she was booking up for the trip to Dignitas – that Swiss clinic that, for a few grand, will help you commit suicide. Initially, to the philosophically and ethically untutored, this sounds like a natural development of personal choice and autonomy. For those who want to retain control of their destiny, it is an attractive evasion of the hard road of dying well. Of course it also evades the reality that, once established as a licit option, the pressure will be on the elderly to ‘do the decent thing’, cease to be a ‘burden’ to their offspring and society and plan their ride on the ‘long green needle’. No doubt, in a time of growing austerity and demographic imbalance – not enough young taxpayers to fund a geriatric state health system – the pressure will also be on the old to cash in their chips at c.75

The family need have no say in this. They will be relieved of responsibility and will evade the maturing and testing in love that care, of those who once cared for them, demands. This is to say nothing of the affront to God that is implicit in self-slaughter.

All of this is in deep contrast to the response of Simeon. He announces that he is delighted to have seen the Messiah because now he can die in peace. There is no fear of death here but rather an acknowledgement of the mercy of God and the servant’s heart subject to His will.

As a priest, I have seen a lot of dying. It is not attractive and I do not look forward to it. The process is unpredictable and exhausting. However, what I do know is that, in the process of our dying, there is to be

found both the extraordinary courage of ordinary people and the discovery of new and unimaginable depths of love. There is also the not inconsiderable benefit, except in cases of sudden death, of that encounter with our final reality that leads through purgation to reconciliation and spiritual peace. We, who have known the coming of the Christ child and, like Simeon, held Him in our hands, may not relish the process any more than the next mortal but we should know how to employ the time of our transition and we should not fear the outcome. For those who love Jesus and try to serve Him in this life, there is not the threat of extinction or oblivion but rather the promise of transformation and transcendence, of reconciliation and joy. This is the Gospel we preach to a doubting and darkening world, the prospect we hold out to those whose hopelessness and pride leads them down the road of self slaughter.

We can expect new legislative attempts to make the option of euthanasia available here and, as many MPs are philosophical illiterates and already consent to the involuntary killing of those who want to live and have a fundamental right to do so i.e. the unborn, it can only be illogical sentimentality that will prevent them adding further to the demography of doom.

Our task, as the faithful, is to stand with Simeon and Anna, proclaim the Good News to the dying – which is all of us – and resist the work of the ancient enemy and, by our holy living and holy dying.

Holy Family of Jesus, pray for us.