

Definition of Family for Today?

Today, I pose a question - What is the definition of family for today? It used to have a relatively simple answer, but today I am not so sure. As I grew up, it meant Mum and Dad, and two or three children - sometimes only one, and sometimes more.

I grew up in a family of five - Mum, Dad, my brother and sister together with myself. But there were many visits to immediate family. There were five aunts and one uncle plus their spouses; not to mention fifteen cousins. Then there was my maternal grandmother who came on holiday with us (that is five plus one). There was also a great great uncle who reached the age of 106 (having retired at the grand old age of 55!). Every weekend was taken up with visiting or being visited. That was family when I was young. But then, do we include family pets? Are they family as well? There was our mongrel Chum who got me over my fear of dogs, followed by Pembroke Corgi Bryn, who, I took walking every day for about eight years.

As an adult, Margaret and I were married and had two sons. One is married with two children and the other has a partner and one child. One female grandchild has a female partner. Then when I married Mary, two step-children were added to the family, together with their spouses and three step grand-children.

Now that I live alone, do I, in myself, constitute family. I don't think so; it takes more than one to tango in this regard. Actually, for the past two weeks I haven't been living alone. I have a partner who followed me down from Auckland the Sunday before last. And we're settling in very well together. This may well shock you and you may be already formulating questions to ask me; but not only me but perhaps the Bishop as well! Moreover, my new partner is male - however, he is six years old, has four legs, and is a lovely Doberman dog named Mugen. Does a human plus a pet constitute family?

Why, you may well ask, am I telling you all this? Well, because we have, as a society, moved a very long way in a short period of time. And this movement has had a profound effect on what is now accepted as family.

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Solo mums and dads bringing up children. Yes, they existed way back in the past, but they were generally shunned, not accepted as part of normal society. Nowadays solo mums and dads are numerous and accepted as normal members of society. And children are being brought up by couples in same sex relationships. I found it interesting that Sir Elton John has decided to retire from touring as an entertainer in order to concentrate on rearing his and his partner's two children. Mind you, he can afford to retire.

As Church family, and I do regard you all as my extended family - sisters and brothers together in Jesus Christ - are we prepared to accept these new definitions of family and incorporate people in what we regard as different forms of relationship? Turning to page 3 of Fisherfolk, you will see that we are being invited to take part in a discussion about the choice parishes may be able to make about either blessing same sex relationships, or opting out. Which way will we go? What criteria will affect our decision?

I know you will make up your own minds. I have already made up mine, and I'm going to tell you what it is. I'm going to tell you that I will bless same sex relationships, if the parish agrees such blessings can take place. I would do so after interviewing the couple, and making sure that the basis of the relationship is love in its finest form - that is, truly caring for one another. I would also wish to assess that the the decision being made is not life-style based, but a deep sense of knowing that same sex relationship is natural and normal for them.

Coming to today's Gospel, Matthew tells us that Mary and Joseph were engaged. It was then discovered that she was pregnant. Having considered the problem and the intervention of an angel, he took her home as his wife. A wedding ceremony isn't mentioned and Jewish culture was pretty big on such occasions - an opportunity to let one's hair down. There might have been a wedding ceremony, but perhaps there wasn't, given the circumstances.

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And so we have Mary, Joseph, and Jesus - wife and husband; mother, father and baby son - what we might call a nuclear family today. But the pregnancy caused concern in their religious and cultural setting.

Mary and Joseph were pious and committed people to their Jewish faith, and Luke's Gospel tells us that he was circumcised on the 8th day after his birth and officially named Jesus. Mary also complied to the Law by going through their purification ceremony; and then, because Jesus was the first born, he was publicly presented to the Lord in the Temple at Jerusalem, and the appropriate sacrifice was made according to the Law. We learn that Mary and Joseph had deep faith and devout piety, in their own appropriate cultural setting. The rather tenuous beginning to their marriage is solidified by complying with the scriptural Law and performing the cultural rituals. Most of the tittle-tattle back in the Galilean community would have lessened as a result. Mary and Joseph would have been incorporated back into village life completely.

We might discern here something of the strength of Jewish community. Faith in the living God, and the Law from scripture to enable an equable way of life; life still with its hardships and problems, often extreme in nature: but with the certainty of a good final outcome.

In many ways, our culture has been damaged by the huge changes that have taken place in society. Something is needed for people to hang on to as an anchor. As Church community, don't we have an opportunity here by incorporating needy people into our family and helping them to feel accepted and loved?

Do you think and feel that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ would approve? Or not? Amen.