



Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Holy Family 2021

To be read at all Sunday Masses on 26 December 2021

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

I extend to each of you, and to your families and loved ones, my warm good wishes as we celebrate the birth of our Saviour this Christmas. I pray that, in a deepened way, your heart might be opened to the loving closeness of the Lord Jesus. Now, and always, He is Emmanuel: God with us and God for us; nearer to us than our innermost thoughts, and closer to us than our heartbeat. It was because God loved the world so much, because God loved you so much, that He sent His only Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. For so great a gift, we too sing in thanksgiving with the angels: *'Glory to God in the highest.'*

Whatever ups and downs the past year has brought, remember that you belong to Christ. In our isolation or distance, in our fear or disappointment, we have a home in Christ and in His Church. He knows our name. Our baptism is part of His life-story. The Lord never will never forget us or abandon us. How we need to be reminded of this, especially in difficult times. We are united to Christ, and to each other, in the family of the Church. Ours is not a do-it yourself faith or a go-it-alone religion. Believing and belonging go together. We journey with each other as Christ's Body, called to live our faith from within the Church towards to the world.

The Feast of the Holy Family this year follows on immediately from Christmas Day. We remain focused on the new-born Christ child, held in the arms of His mother Mary and watched over by His foster father, St Joseph. United in Christ, Christian families too are places where believing and belonging go together, giving much-needed witness to the unchanging virtues of faith, love, and hope, of patience, mercy and kindness.

What must it have been like for Joseph and his pregnant wife to have arrived in Bethlehem, exhausted by the journey from Nazareth? We know Mary was close to her delivery date. Joseph would have slowed the pace of travel to protect his wife and her unborn child. To avoid any possible hostility in Samaria, the Holy Family also probably took a detour. It would, therefore, have taken Joseph and Mary a week to ten days, maybe even longer, to reach their destination. They then struggled to find suitable accommodation and had to bed down beside the animals in the straw. Through all this they have something to teach us: they kept faith and they trusted in God's promises.

Fast forward twelve years. The Holy Family had been in Jerusalem for the Passover. As they travelled home, their beloved child, the Lord Jesus, went missing. At that time men sometimes travelled separately from women, and the children travelled with either parent. Mary thought the Lord Jesus was with Joseph and Joseph thought He was with Mary. How panicked they must have been, fearing that He was lost, even that He had been injured or killed. Rushing back to Jerusalem, they found the Lord Jesus three days later teaching in the temple, getting on with His *'Heavenly Father's business.'* It's significant that they found Him alive after three days. The Gospel points to the resurrection. Again, there is something to learn here. In all we face, how we need to keep faith and trust in God's promises. As the Christmas carol *'Hark! The herald angels sing'* reminds us, Christ is born so we *'no more may die,'* born to raise us from the earth, born to give us *'second birth.'*

Dear friends, we each need to nurture our faith. We each need to renew our trust in God's promises. We live with hope in Christ born for us and raised from death on the cross for us. This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it. Thank you to parents, grandparents, and great grandparents for passing on the faith in your families. Thank you to catechists, teachers, clergy and religious sisters for passing on the faith in the family of the Church. Please be encouraged to continue helping people to believe and belong in Christ, especially through the celebration of the Sacraments, through cherishing prayer and the Scriptures, and through loving service to those most in need.

I assure you of my prayers on this beautiful Feast of the Holy Family: prayers for each of you and, in particular, for anyone struggling with life, and especially family life or marriage; for anyone coping with illness or bereavement; and for anyone uncertain about what 2022 might hold. Let us unite ourselves to Our Lady and to St Joseph. With them we keep faith and trust in God's promise: a Saviour has been born for us who is Christ the Lord. He is Emmanuel: God with us and God for us.

With every blessing for this Christmas Season and the New Year

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Wilson', with a small cross symbol to the left and a horizontal line underneath.

+ John Wilson

Metropolitan Archbishop of Southwark