

Families and How to Survive Them: it's becoming almost politically incorrect to defend the institution of the family as a 'good' in itself, even as 'best practice', an ideal we should still honour and respect, and aim for. And I wonder if this increasing disrespect for the family isn't tied up with an increasingly jaundiced view of Christianity as but a repository of past values, the relict of a past age, the defender of a patriarchal society we are best without - which is to gravely mistake what is going on. There are values here which matter, both of nature and of nurture, not least the stability we all need of a loving environment, and there are ways and means of acquiring and maintaining this - all sorts of best practices which can help: mutual obedience; a sensitivity to the needs of others; knowing when it's time to speak and not to speak; to lay down the law and not to lay down the law and when, perhaps in desperation, to pray instead, to acknowledge that being a good parent or child is a learning process and there are times when one simply doesn't know what to do next. That's when grandparents can be so useful, or neighbours and friends, even, dare one say, a faith community. And having faith is really what these passages are all about: faith, not in the virtue of the family, which may or may not hold true, but in a God who works in and through us, despite our strengths and inadequacies; who has a care for us which we can liken to that of a parent for a child but which goes deeper still; an unconditional care which we cannot subvert, nor earn. It's there. It's a given, due entirely to the nature of God in whose image we are then made but take most of our lives to re-discover. And Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna and the child Jesus are all subject to this learning process, to this skill which both Simeon and Anna display so well here, of being amenable to the prompting of God's Holy Spirit; of knowing, not only when to speak but what to say - mediated, of course, through the writer of the gospel and his own listening experience or faith. As a gentile Christian, he's learnt something of what it means to be a disciple of this child Jesus; to have come to faith in a religion not his own; to be surprised at the depth and wisdom of the Jewish tradition, portraying a people on a journey culminating in Christ: a journey in which Jerusalem becomes a paradigmatic focal point for us all; a place and a people from which God now reaches out to everyone. And here, in Anna, we have its first evangelist; and, in Simeon, a prophet - a bridge between the old and the new; and, in Mary and Joseph, two law-abiding but very puzzled parents; and, in Jesus, the source of their wonder; a source for our wonder, too.

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