

# MYTHS AND MODELS OF FAMILY

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**T**HE WORD 'FAMILY' IS A VERY POWERFUL one. It can evoke memories and emotions, provoke moral judgements, theological explorations, sociological theories. It can conjure up fantasies. The fact that it can produce such diverse responses suggests that behind the word there is a complex concept. Yet rather than respecting the complexity, we refer to 'the family' as if it were a simply defined entity.

Is there such an entity which adequately expresses a wide range of experiences and expectations? We may be forgiven for assuming there is if we have had a happy experience which has become our model for what is desirable for everyone. We are fortunate if we have had two loving parents, siblings, extended family and friends to give us a sense of safety and optimism about being alive.

However if we look around us we see that the traditional model is not a physical nor an emotional reality for everyone. Parents die or leave, marriages fail, families break up. Yet the stereotype of the intact, happy family persists and is powerful enough to force other family constellations into the background of our thinking. Non-stereotypical people are often pushed to the periphery of society and judged somehow as failures in themselves. How real to us is the poverty of a single mother, the loneliness of a separated or unmarried individual, the neediness of the elderly, the confusion of children of separated parents?

If we are to value the existence and the experience of all human beings we cannot restrict our thinking to any one image of family today. It is more respectful to speak of 'a family', 'different families', 'my family', 'your family'. People have particular experiences which produce their image of family which they judge as positive, negative, satisfying, unsatisfying. Our discussion needs to be broad enough to include various family constellations which make up the reality of family relationships. We need to include in our thinking not only the traditional two-parent family but also couples without children, single-parent families (regardless of the cause), adult children with ageing parents, blended families and unattached individuals. 'Whatever the family means by family is what the family is.'<sup>1</sup>

Our own experience will determine to some degree our openness to various definitions and images of family. If we are aware of the influences upon us we are then free to challenge the power of all the habits of thinking which tie our concept of family to a certain shape, size and style. While the traditional two-parent family is ideally the most desirable because of its balance, families today take different forms and can maintain loving stable relationships.

There are increasing numbers of people whose experience of childhood, marriage and parenting has been disrupted, yet their hopes for themselves are no less real than those of apparently conventional groupings. Before we judge the 'limitations' of other groups we need to acknowledge also that some people are able to maintain socially acceptable images which hide disorder, apathy, abuse and lack of commitment or attachment.

A family is a fundamental unit of society for it is where human beings have their beginning. It is a basic need for us all to 'belong' and we all need some experience that we call 'family'. 'Man survives in groups; this is inherent in the human condition.'<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of our subsequent experience we can all be sure of one thing—that we have had two parents. Even if only until the moments after conception, the potential human being has been part of a group. As human beings our psychological and emotional acceptance of our own existence depends on our ability to acknowledge the relationship that produced us. For our acceptance of our life as positive and developmental, we must be able to see that original parental relationship as creative and affirming of life. Otherwise, life is an imposition and a burden.

We are brought into existence by the actions, if not necessarily the intentions, of the people who are our biological parents.<sup>3</sup> The fact that we are alive means that we were accepted, if only to a minimum degree. When we are born we are radically at the mercy of other people who are willing to care for us so that we will survive. At the hands of those people, literally, we receive the feeling of being alive. We are, as infants, always somewhere along the continuum of being loved into life or simply allowed to exist. Children cannot make their parents love them if parents are unable or unwilling to love, so it is one of the great risks of life that our future physical, psychological and emotional health is built on this precarious foundation of relationship.

There are many factors beyond biology which create the emotional entity of family. There is an area of transition from biological to

emotional relationship from which the meaning of family develops more richly and which becomes a critical factor in the process of an individual's human development.

Even the most loving parents are limited human beings and can never meet all the needs and demands of their children. Children learn very early that there are disappointments and frustrations in being alive, which must be tolerated. The way we learn this (for we have all been little children once) has an effect on how we view this life, ourselves and others, how we relate and make choices in relationships.

Family can be viewed as a continuum of experience along which human beings move, in different roles at different stages. It takes openness, persistence and strength to progress creatively and it takes a lifetime. We will always have been someone's child; we will always have had to move away from childhood towards independence; we will always at some time make choices which lead us into partnership and parenthood or to remain alone. No matter how self-sufficient we become we will never be immune to the inherent needs for nurturing and care as we gradually recognize and embrace our own mortality.

Ideally our family is the group in which we gain a dual sense of belonging and of individuality. We learn to adapt and accommodate ourselves to others, discovering through trial and error what is required of us and what will gain for us acknowledgement and acceptance. We learn about personal and relational living. The balance between the tensions—self and other, individual and group—is often at the heart of marital and family conflicts, and individual emotional and spiritual distress.

According to Erik Erikson<sup>4</sup> a family is 'the basis in a child for a sense of identity which will later combine a sense of being "alright", of being oneself and of becoming what other people trust one will become'.

Erikson writes poignantly of the inherent imperfection which is always part of childhood and thus of life itself: 'A sense of inner division and universal nostalgia for a paradise forfeited'.<sup>5</sup> All people are vulnerable to this mysterious sense of longing, a vague cry of our spirit for something long gone, for the comfort and safety of a time past. Wherever we are along the continuum of survival the inevitable task is to leave the dependency of childhood where we were allowed for a short time to be helpless and to be cared for. Perhaps this is the clue to the mystique surrounding family and the power it can exercise. It speaks to us in the deepest, most vulnerable part of our

being, to the totally receptive self we were as infants, to the unconscious level where we yearn for our 'lost paradise'.

To me, this is the point where our human self and our spiritual self are one, where we seek meaning and models for our existence, where we seek oneness with others and with God. Psychoanalytic theorists say that people never give up in their attempts to regain the good of the past and to put things right for themselves and those they love.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that we have sought 'spiritual models' in our various searchings. The relationship between Mary and Joseph and Jesus would seem a logical place to seek inspiration and insight about family relationships; they, after all, experienced the mystery of creative relationships to an extraordinary degree. However, the 'Holy Family' is as much a stereotype of family as is the TV commercial and the 'sitcom' representations. It is a religious image rather than a scriptural image, pleasant and sentimental and not particularly helpful in the culture of today. Thus the very relationship which could help us has developed just as improbable an image as the secular family stereotype. One of the difficulties with stereotypes is that they maintain considerable power over attitudes long after they have lost their relevance.

Our traditional religious image of the 'Holy Family' is of a young, fragile wife, an older husband of undefined personality and one perfect child. This has been promoted as the reality against which people are to measure themselves as faithful Christians, although it is the product of times not attuned to the demands and stresses of intimate relationships (perhaps not even aware) and the rigours of rearing children in an increasingly complex society. The relationship between Joseph and Mary has not been explored as any model of intimacy for men and women wanting to establish relationships of mutuality and equality and to complement one another's spirituality. It is not helpful for women who choose to be independent, who have no one to be dependent on, who cannot afford to be fragile in our social and economic climate. It is not a helpful image to men seeking a model of masculinity in a culture which distorts masculinity and femininity.

The 'Holy Family' presents the problem of relating to Jesus as God and Jesus as man, to Mary as mother of God and Mary as human being. The temptation and the danger is to think of Jesus in his historical existence as either 'double strength' or 'half strength' human, in either case living his humanity differently from other people. It is a small step from this thinking to a travesty of Jesus the

person as some sort of alien child of science fiction or worse still a 'whizz kid' who is only pretending to be human.

With Mary too, the images are polarized. She is 'Mother of Sorrows', her life total suffering, or Mary ever-youthful and unscathed, protected from the full force of her life because she is not like other women. Jesus's humanity was surely not distorted by his divinity. Mary's humanity was not distorted by her openness to God.

And Joseph surely would have been a responsive, reflective, responsible man, but pious devotion has reduced this vibrant figure to an invention—middle-aged, hovering in the background, a 'foster father' lacking the power of a 'real father'.

There must be a more fruitful way to approach Mary and Joseph and Jesus which connects with our ideas and experiences of family. How are we to draw from these three people a model of healthy relationships to satisfy our needs in relationship with one another and with God?

We have our personal, prayerful reflection on the gospel events. We can look to our personal experience of family and make what links we need with the gospel story. However, as we grow up and mature in our relating, we need to mature in our spirituality also so that the way we relate to God, to Jesus, is fitting and worthy of us as responsible people. Family relationships are so basic to our humanity that they probably contain most of the happiest and the most painful aspects of our lives. The way we link our personal experience and our spirituality depends to a considerable extent on these experiences. I think we receive our images of God in the same way, from the same people, as we receive all our messages about ordinary life.

One fascinating starting point is the literature of Personality Development and Family Systems. There are many authors whose material gives valuable insight into the development and functioning of families which can be called healthy.<sup>7</sup> This gives a helpful alternative approach to set beside traditional pious conjectures about Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

David Scharff states a truth profound in its simplicity: 'A child's life depends on having a mother'.<sup>8</sup> He is writing about a child's early attachment to its mother and the development of relationship with its father. The critical early environment for a child is provided by mother, the person who provides all the activities of care, the handling and responding that Scharff calls 'emotional conversations'.

When the infant is strongly attached to the mother he uses her as a base from which to explore the world. . . . The infant (and the older person he becomes) has an unthinking confidence in the unfailing accessibility and support of attachment figures.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus appears from the gospels as a well-balanced personality. We could conjecture about his development during his first thirty years of which we know little. We can wonder what those years were like, that such a man as Jesus could emerge. I like to think that his development into mature manhood occurred in the human setting of his parents, his friends and his community.

Scharff refers to Donald Winnicott's image of the child 'first seeing himself reflected in his mother's eyes', the process through which a child gains the earliest sense of self. This mothering process is essential for the growth of one's knowledge of oneself as a person. As the child develops he receives the reflection of himself by the way his mother responds to his needs and moods. Through this process he gradually learns to tolerate his own feelings as his own, and not to fear them. Without a mother's ability to reflect and contain the child's inner state an infant develops an 'external personality' at the expense of his true self.<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of this theorizing, Jesus's 'true self' that we see always in the gospels reflects back to the quality of his early relationships and the 'loving gaze' between Mary and her infant.

It is a beautiful image, that of a child seeing itself lovingly reflected in its mother's eyes, and it resonates deeply with the image of a nurturing and maternal God, loving us into responsive life: with the God of Isaiah, Yahweh who says '... you are precious in my eyes' (Isai 43, 4). This total image—a mother and her child, Mary and Jesus, Yahweh and his people, God with us—has a resonance which reaches our deepest needs for relationship and belonging, our yearning for our 'paradise forfeited'.

For Yahweh consoles his people  
and takes pity on those who are afflicted.  
For Zion was saying 'Yahweh has abandoned me,  
the Lord has forgotten me'.  
Does a woman forget the baby at her breast  
or fail to cherish the child of her womb?  
Yet even if these forget  
I will never forget you.

(Isai 49, 13-15)

We must consider Mary's reality in this relationship. An unimaginative question can be posed—was it all easy for her because Jesus, her child, was God? To say this would do her a great injustice as a young woman faced with the extraordinary circumstances of her

motherhood and her subsequent life. She could not have been a woman passive and uninvolved, simply letting life happen to her, if our developmental theory has any validity.

Mary's response to the angel's message was, understandably, confusion. She chose to accede to the request to be the mother of the Messiah, surely the choice of a person of courage and imagination and deep faith in God; and of someone with the energy and spirit to embrace such an undertaking—to receive the astonishing favour God was bestowing on her.

In the work *Woman, first among the faithful* Francis Moloney writes of Mary, that instead of remaining 'in the realm of the controllable', she 'commits herself to the ways of God in a consummate act of faith'.<sup>11</sup> His exploration of the Annunciation leads him to 'this profound indication of the reason for Mary's greatness: she is a woman radically open to the presence of God in her life'.<sup>12</sup> This presence was totally real for Mary in the person of her child. She lived within the paradox of her almost unimaginable act of faith in her eternal God being expressed through her physical mothering of this God-made-human child.

The role of a father, according to David Scharff,<sup>13</sup> is twofold. He protects the attachment between mother and child at its crucial time. He is also the agent by which the child is gradually encouraged to move out from the intensity of the maternal relationship towards the wider world. This is a powerful and delicate role, requiring of a man sensitivity and self-possession and deep trust in his relationship with his wife.

We can conjecture safely, I suggest, that Joseph was such a man, a positive model for the growing child Jesus and the young man who emerged to public life. Jesus was recognized as the carpenter's son and it is not too difficult to imagine that Joseph would have been a man similar in character to Jesus, for surely he had played an active part in the forming of the human personality of Jesus. Why else would he have been present if not to be an active agent in the situation?

Many people would say this is archaic thinking about male and female roles for the last years of the twentieth century. However, when we hear the pain and anger, grief and regret expressed by many people, such theory still has much to enlighten our experience. The centrality of family bonds seems to be confirmed in the 'secular' world by the strength of feeling generated, even in casual conversations, about their presence, their quality or their absence. It is also

reflected in writings about causes and treatment of dysfunctional families.

By viewing the small family of the gospel in the human context of developmental theory we can draw only tentative but at least non-sentimental conclusions and build a more realistic and accessible model.

One of the puzzling events of Jesus's early life is his disappearance for three days and his re-emergence in the temple (Lk 2, 44–50). His allusion to his mission is often presented as the key issue. We can also conjecture how this incident was a challenge to Joseph and Mary as parents. Luke's Gospel says that they did not understand Jesus's words to them. He is already speaking as if responding to some inner calling and sense of mission. But he went home with them to Nazareth, he lived under their authority and Mary 'stored all these things in her heart' (v 51).

This is all rich material for more conjecture. According to the gospel accounts of Jesus's infancy, Joseph and Mary had many indications of the specialness of their child, obviously beginning at the Annunciation. Joseph must have been attuned to God's communications to him, and ready to cope with the rigorous circumstances in which he had to protect his family—sudden journeys, hiding from the murderous Herod, finding a place to settle. Joseph and Mary had the significant encounters in the Temple with Simeon and Anna. What did they do with all these experiences? How would Joseph have talked about his revelatory dreams? How much would they have told Jesus of those early experiences, as he grew older? How much of Jesus's sense of mission would have come from what his parents told him. Or how much was direct revelation?

The relationship between Joseph and Mary is central to these questions even if only for our conjecture. Our traditional image of the 'Holy Family' has always suggested a rather colourless relationship but I think this is, again, unfair to them as real people, and to us, also real people, searching for inspiration and assurance in our quest for God's action in our lives. To quote David Scharff again:<sup>14</sup>

A whole family centres itself on the relationship of the parental couple. Other relationships take their direction with reference to this central one and their strengths and weaknesses echo vicissitudes of the central bond.

Francis Moloney<sup>15</sup> points out that we must take seriously the betrothal of Mary and Joseph and that there is no indication in the

text of any vow by Mary to perpetual virginity. ‘The virginity of Mary as far as the New Testament is concerned is not about the virtue of Mary but it is about the origins of Jesus.’ He continues:

There is no one even with a minimum knowledge of Jewish psychology and the theological blessedness of a fruitful marriage based on the command of Yahweh in Genesis 1, 28 who would suggest that a betrothed Jewish girl would have gone into a situation of betrothal after having taken a vow of virginity . . . the young girl was formally regarded as the man’s wife.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus’s destiny as God-made-man was facilitated by two human beings, willing to trust the mystery of God’s action in their lives. This is the fact which makes the model of the Family of Nazareth a believable and accessible one for all ordinary Christians wanting to bring Christ to bear in the world. It is not the ‘perfection’ of that family that makes it a model for us. The idea of the relationships, the bonds between Joseph, Mary and Jesus, offers encouragement to translate those bonds into terms relevant to ourselves—that closeness to Christ is possible within the structure of close relationships which also contain pain and suffering; that transcendent love is worth striving for, even by limited human beings and that life in Christ is found in relationship.

To reverse the direction of comparison—the experiences we have of family relationships may bring the relationships between Mary and Joseph and Jesus closer to us and more real to us. Parents know that loving their children can be painful in its depth. People who love one another know that loving does not eradicate suffering and that in all close relationships there is always the necessity for separateness and individuality and the imperative to extend the boundaries of love into care and compassion for others. Perhaps that is what Jesus was intimating in Matthew 12, 46–50 when he asks: ‘Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?’

Family relationships can be so intense that they can restrict personal and spiritual growth. Paradoxically, one of the criteria for healthy parenting is the ability to foster children’s individuality and separateness. Healthy maturity is demonstrated by the ability to separate from one’s parents. Committed parenthood brings an inevitable sense of loss, the complementary experience of mourning that Erik Erikson sees as the legacy of childhood. Joseph, Mary and Jesus faced these challenges to maturity. If we can imagine them asking questions that were central to their identity and having to wait

for the answers to unfold, then we have some means to connect with them as we ask our own questions.

Healthy relationships are liberating and empowering. Healthy models energize and motivate us. The 'Holy Family' of traditional style has not done this for us. It has provided limited insights concerning spouses and parents. It has had even less to offer others—the 'alone' people, single, divorced, widowed, deserted people, in other words those who do not have a 'Mary' or a 'Joseph'. The persistence of the 'Holy Family' myth has left the needs of these people unrecognized. They also have to find meaning in their existence and learn how to respond to God's call; that is the essence of all discipleship. Discipleship does not depend on being married or single.

Because of the universality of the concept of family, it must have something to say to all Christians, regardless of their 'status'. I think the answer is to be found in the ideas of relationship and discipleship: they were the key to the lives of Jesus and Mary and Joseph as they put their lives at God's disposal, and they are the key to our lives also.

What is given to people in families is the fruit of what those before them have lived and want to share. The sharing of life in a family reflects the process which begins for Christians in Baptism. It is usually through the process of family living that people have the opportunity to become part of the community of all who are one with Christ. It is through parents and other significant people that living faith is transmitted.

Family living nurtures its members, giving identity and purpose. A family hands on its history and its values. Each generation modifies and contributes to all these elements. In its health a family adapts to changing times; in its wholeness it encourages its members to be generous with their talents. Its children grow up to become generative adults and the cycle continues, the continuum is maintained.

Is this not also what we ask of our Christian community—our Church? While actual family bonds may be broken, the ideal is still valid. Our church community may fail us through its human instruments but the promise of God's constancy remains and is expressed specifically in terms that speak to our human experience and resonate with all the longing of the human spirit for love, protection and care. 'Yet even if these forget I will never forget you. I have branded you on the palm on my hand' (Isai 49, 13-16).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eastman, Moira: *The magical power of the family* (Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1991), introduction.
- <sup>2</sup> Minuchin, Salvador: *Families and family therapy* (Tavistock Publications, Gt Britain, 1974), p 47.
- <sup>3</sup> The mystery of Jesus is that he came into existence by the intention of God the Father and the co-operation, not the action, of his earthly parents.
- <sup>4</sup> Erikson, Erik: *Childhood and society* (Penguin Books, 1975), p 241.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 74.
- <sup>6</sup> Balint, Enid: 'Unconscious communication between husband and wife', in Joffe, Walter G. (ed): *What is psychoanalysis?* (Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1968).
- <sup>7</sup> For example the work of Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler, Salvador Minuchin, Virginia Satir, Moira Eastman.
- <sup>8</sup> Scharff, David: *The sexual relationship* (Routledge, 1982), ch 3, p 14.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 17.
- <sup>10</sup> Winnicott, D. W.: 'Establishment of relationship with external reality', ch 1 from *Human nature* (Free Assoc Books, London, 1988), p 108.
- <sup>11</sup> Moloney, Francis J.: *Woman, first among the faithful* (Dove Communications, Melbourne, 1984), p 47.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 47.
- <sup>13</sup> Scharff, *op. cit.*, pp 27-28.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 14.
- <sup>15</sup> Moloney, *op. cit.*, p 42.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 42.