

Faith in the Family

Dr Dominika Kurek-Chomycz and Professor John Sullivan

LACE, Hall One

Monday 13th January 2020, 7.30 – 8.45pm

Part One (DKC): Faith, Family, and the Bible

In the brief synopsis of our talk there are three questions listed. As a biblical scholar, I have been asked to address the first one: What does Scripture teach about faith and family?

This is easier said than done, which is why in what follows I shall begin by problematising the topic. First and foremost, we cannot assume that our present day categories can be easily translated into those attested in the ancient world. This is why in the first section of this talk I propose to focus on *terminology*.

Problems of terminology

When asking a question about scriptural perspectives on faith and family, we are likely to project our own ideas about both concepts. The word ‘family’ appears on 48 out of 133 pages of the *Report on the Listening Phase of the Liverpool Archdiocesan Synod 2020*, and the most frequent response to the first question of the Listening Exercise (‘Where in your everyday life do you experience love, truth, goodness, hope, and joy?’) refers to family life. While respondents do not always use the word ‘family’ in exactly the same sense, in most cases the term seems to denote either parent(s) and child(ren) or, when employed by a grandparent, often refers to children and grandchildren. Sometimes other relatives are also mentioned or implied.

It would be an exaggeration to say that there were no families in this sense in the ancient world. But it is important to note that even though the English word ‘family’ comes from Latin, Latin *familia* is not the same as our family. None of the biblical books were originally written in Latin, however, so what about the original biblical languages? All the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek. As for what Christians call the Old Testament, or sometimes the First Testament, most of the books were written originally in Hebrew, with some parts in Aramaic. A few of the so-called deuterocanonical books, that is books which the Catholic church accepts as part of the Old Testament, but which are not part of the Jewish Scriptures, were composed in Greek. While in your English translations of the Bible you are likely to encounter the word ‘family’ a number of times – exactly how many depends on the version – neither Hebrew nor Greek have a word that corresponds exactly to the English word ‘family’.

This is not only a simple matter of the differences in the vocabulary; rather, it is indicative of how ancients conceived of the world around them. There are several Hebrew terms which in English

translations of the Bible are rendered as ‘family’, and which in turn have to do with the Israelite kinship structure. The people of Israel, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, were divided into twelve tribes, originating from the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. Tribes in turn consisted of what in Hebrew is referred to as *mishpakhah* (מִשְׁפָּחָה). The latter is often rendered as ‘family’, but this is rather misleading, as this was a unit of kinship of a far wider scope. The closest to our ‘family’ was the third level of the kinship structure of Israel, *beth-av* (בֵּית־אָב), literally ‘father’s house’, or sometimes in the plural, ‘fathers’ (*avoth*) house’. *Beth-av* was the kinship structure of Israel ‘in which the individual Israelite felt the strongest sense of inclusion, identity, protection, and responsibility’.¹ The phrase, however, is not used uniformly in the Hebrew Bible; at times it appears to denote a unit resembling our nuclear family, but far more often, it refers to an extended family – and more. In addition to the descendants of a single living ancestor, it could denote slaves and their families, but also resident farm labourers and others. What is more, as observed by Carol Meyers, a renowned expert in Israelite families, the phrase, besides ‘a group of humans ... that constitute a living group’, sometimes ‘includes the domicile and landholdings too. That is, it incorporates the material features—especially the land—that were essential for the survival of the living group in its present and also its continuity over generations’.²

Besides *beth-av*, and sometimes, *mishpakhah*, the English word ‘family’ may also be used to render the Hebrew *akhim* (אֲחִים), ‘brothers’, and a few other terms. Interestingly, in the Hebrew Scriptures we also come across a phrase analogous to *beth-av*, but featuring a mother: *beth-em*, literally ‘mother’s house’ (see Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4; 8:2), a reminder that the Israelite society was not as straightforwardly patriarchal as it is often envisaged. Notably, however, this latter phrase, as opposed to *beth-av*, is as a rule not translated as ‘family’.

To now turn briefly to Greek, there are a number of terms which in some English translations, in certain contexts, are rendered as ‘family’: first and foremost *oikia* (οἰκία), literally ‘household/house’, but also *oikos* (οἶκος) – house/household; *oikeios* (οἰκεῖος) – the one who is part of the household; *sungeneia* (συγγένεια) – ‘kinship, kindred,’ *sungenēs*, m. (συγγενής) or *sungenis*, f. (συγγενίς) – ‘relative,’ *patria* (πατριά) – ‘lineage, descent,’ *adelfotēs* (ἀδελφότης) – lit. ‘brotherhood.’ Of these *oikia* and *oikos* are particularly important, and similarly to *beth-av*, they are not limited to the spouses, their children and other blood relatives sharing a dwelling. Rather, especially in wealthier dwellings, they would include a host of other people, such as slaves and/or freedmen and freedwomen, as well as other dependants.

Also the other key term in our title must not be taken for granted. Suffice it to say that ‘faith’ in Christian parlance is often understood as a set of beliefs, dogmatic propositions to which one must give intellectual assent. But, when our Bibles translate the Hebrew terms *emunah* (אֱמוּנָה) or *emeth* (אֱמֶת), or the Greek *pistis* (πίστις), this is not what is intended. The semantic range of the Hebrew root ‘*mn*’ (note ‘Amen’, which we know from Christian prayers!) encompasses in the first place notions of reliability and faithfulness, but also stability and constancy. It begins with God, who is a faithful and reliable God, *el emeth*. Human *emeth* is thus a response to the divine reliability and

¹ C.J.H. Wright, ‘Family,’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. by D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 761-769, here: 762.

² Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 112.

faithfulness. Similarly focused on relationality is the Greek *pistis*, where the emphasis, however, is on trust. This is why in looking at examples of how faith is passed on in a family context, we should in the first place consider it as a matter of sharing of one's experience of God's faithfulness, rather than teaching dogmatic statements.

Having problematised the question, providing in passing a crash course in Hebrew and Greek, let me now try to offer a few thoughts on our topic, beginning with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

Generalisations are surely not warranted, but in view of the significance of *beth-av* in the Israelite social structure, especially before the development of any more formal educational settings, the household was the main place of religious instruction. The centralisation of cult in the temple in Jerusalem, meant that household cultic activities were central to the religious experience for the majority of people. Essential to the fostering of the Israelites' relationship with the God of their ancestors was the passing on of the oral tradition. This included retelling of the stories of God's deliverance, not only to remember God's powerful deeds of the past, but also to build the confidence in God's trustworthiness and reliability for the present and the future.

Perhaps the most significant text commanding parents (or at least fathers) as to how they should instruct their children (or sons?) is Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which begins with the Shema, the well-known 'Hear, O Israel' text. Not only was the proclamation of exclusive loyalty to the God of Israel to be recited and explained at home and elsewhere, but what is more, the passage also stipulated a *material* manifestation in the form of wearing portions of the text upon the arm and the forehead (the practice known as the binding of tefillin, or phylacteries), as well as inscribing it on doorposts and gates. Incidentally, also in our contemporary context we must not underestimate the significance that the material environment has for our topic.

It is not entirely clear to what extent women were involved in, and benefitted from, household religious instruction, especially since biblical texts for the most part are written from the perspective of men. Yet in spite of this, there are a number of examples of theologically literate women, including Miriam, Moses' sister (Ex 15:20-21), as well as other female prophets. Worth noting is also the figure of Hannah, Samuel's mother, and her song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, echoes of which are heard Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46-55.

A remarkable example from a later period, from a book which is not part of the Jewish canon, but is part of the Catholic Old Testament, is the mother of the seven brothers (2 Maccabees 7), killed before her eyes because they refused to eat pork. The narrative suggests that the sons' uncompromising attitude and resolve to die rather than break the law are a result of her own steadfastness and the upbringing which she had earlier provided for the sons.

We must be cautious not to romanticise ancient Israelite households. Even in the biblical narrative, which provides only a very partial insight, we witness strife, sexual violence, hatred and rivalry, abuse, sexual exploitation of slaves and other vulnerable people. There is also polygamy (or to be more precise, polygyny), which for the authors may not have been problematic, but is barely part of

the Western ideal of marriage. But while we need to avoid making sweeping statements, in general, in the Jewish Scriptures, there is a positive attitude towards kinship structures, of which one's household was the basic manifestation. What is more, on the whole, in spite of some examples to the contrary, the prevalent assumption is that the household is the most natural and appropriate place to introduce one to ancestral cult and the nation's special relationship with the God of Israel.

This is important, for things differ considerably when we turn to the NT, as we shall see in the next section.

New Testament

Jesus was a Jew and so were his first followers. While the OT commandment to honour one's father and mother is repeated in several places in the New Testament, including Mt 19:19; Mk 7:10; Lk 18:20; Eph 6:2, one may wonder how this commandment relates to some of the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. For example, in Lk 14:26 we read: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple'. Perhaps even more outrageous would have been to hear Jesus telling the dead to bury their own dead, as he does according to the evangelists (Lk 9:60 and Mt 8:22) when someone approaches him as a potential disciple, but asks for more time as he needs to bury his father first. The incident recounted by Mark, Matthew and Luke about Jesus' mother and brothers looking for him (Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:31-35; Lk 8:19-21), presents Jesus' relationship with his closest kin as far from affectionate, and John's comment that 'not even his brothers believed in him' (Jn 7:5) contributes to a rather convoluted picture of their relationship. Note that in the Gospel of Luke Jesus already as a 12-year-old boy is portrayed as not being particularly obedient. Mary and Joseph are depicted as pious Jews, who every year travel to Jerusalem for the Passover, requiring at least several days' walk from their hometown of Nazareth. Incidentally, the episode recounted in Lk 2:41-51 provides a glimpse of a first century family life, at least as Luke thought of it. Mary and Joseph travel in a large group, including a number of their relatives and acquaintances, and initially the fact that Jesus is not with them when they depart from Jerusalem does not cause any concern. Think of a contrast with modern parents in the West, constantly pre-occupied with the safety of their children – and for good reasons. Yet this puts far too much pressure on parents, and in the case of single parent families, just one person, held responsible for the upbringing of their children, their education, their wellbeing, their safety, etc.

The fact that the contemporaries of Jesus and Paul relied so much on kinship structures makes the anti-family tendencies in the early Christian movement all the more remarkable. As the accounts of the calling of the disciples, and a number of sayings ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels attest, he expected his followers to leave their own households behind (even if the story of Jesus healing Peter's mother in law, recorded in all the Synoptic gospels, Mt 8:14-15, Mk 1:29-31, and Lk 4:38-41, shows that in practice following Jesus did not always have to lead to a complete severing of one's family ties). More importantly, already in the above mentioned sayings of Jesus as to who his true brothers and mother are (Mt 12:48-50; Mk 3:33-35; Lk 8:21; note also Jn 19:26-27), and even more clearly in the letters of Saint Paul, we see that the challenge posed to blood kinship was accompanied by the creation of fictive kinship relationships based on one's attitude to Jesus.

Addressing other believers as ‘brothers’, while not unheard of in ancient voluntary associations, was rather unusual.

This is not to deny that actual household structures were important for the spread of the good news in the first century, following the death of Jesus. Private homes often (albeit not exclusively) served as gathering places for the earliest followers of Jesus (see Acts 2:46 and Paul’s letters). Furthermore, here are a number of individuals baptised together with their entire households, for example Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16:14-15, or Stephanas, whom Paul baptised, again, with his entire household (1 Cor 1:16). Stephanas and the members of his household were the first believers in Achaia, but it is worth noting that once baptised, they ‘devoted themselves to the ministry (*diakonia*) to the saints,’ thus to the ministry to other members of the communities of Christ believers (1 Cor 16:15). The focus thus was no longer on Stephanas’s own *oikia*, but on the newly acquired brothers and sisters. While Stephanas and his household exemplify believers who remained mostly in one place (although they may have travelled occasionally; see 1 Cor 16:17) and concentrated on serving the existing community, Paul and Luke in Acts also tell us about couples who travelled and thus together, presumably accompanied also by other members of their households, proclaimed the gospel, serving in this way as missionaries, but also providing a gathering place for existing assemblies. The best attested missionary couple, mentioned both in Acts and the Pauline corpus (Acts 18; Rom 16:3-5; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19), are Prisca and Aquila. Notably, however, only in Acts do we read that Prisca (whom Luke calls Priscilla) was Aquila’s wife. Paul does not say it, demonstrating that from his perspective, the fact that the couple were married was *not* what defined them (not surprisingly, in view of Paul’s own preference for celibacy); it is far more important that they were Paul’s co-workers in the proclamation of the good news about Jesus Christ.

Just as in the case of Stephanas, what we learn about Prisca and Aquila is how they worked outside their own household, although both in their and many other cases, evangelisation and the nurturing of the faith of other household members must have been part of their everyday life as well. In the New Testament in general, the most explicit passages regarding the latter come from later NT writings, as we shall see in a moment. First, however, we note that while in *some* cases, entire households were baptised, in other cases, individuals joined communities of Christ believers on their own, perhaps accompanied by friends or some relatives, but not necessarily by their spouses.

In this regard 1 Cor 7:12-16 is especially instructive. Paul offers here advice to partners of unbelieving spouses, showing that a peaceful co-existence was possible, even if in practice many such marriages must have ended in divorce (which incidentally was common in the first century). What I particularly like about this passage, however, is that, according to Paul, such a relationship, regardless of whether the unbeliever ever converted, led to the sanctification of the unbelieving party. As opposed thus to a man’s relationship with a prostitute, which led to the defilement of the body of Christ, of which such a man was part (see 1 Cor 6:15-16), a man’s or woman’s relationship with an unbelieving spouse was not condemned; on the contrary, it was commended. This was so even if Paul, with his practical mindset, did allow for divorce if the unbelieving partner wished to separate.

In this section I have focused mainly on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and on the Pauline letters. Before I end, let me say a few words about the letters which also begin with Paul’s name, but

which testify to a very different understanding of the significance of the household, and a much more positive view on marriage. If Paul did indeed write Colossians and Ephesians, and even more so, the Pastoral Letters, that is 1-2 Timothy and Titus, this must have been at a much later stage in his life. What is more, he must have then changed his mind on a number of issues. Especially with regard to the Pastoral letters, the historical situation presupposed is very different from that reflected in letters such as 1 Corinthians. This is why many scholars do not think that they were composed by Paul himself. 2 Timothy 1:5 assumes not just two, but three generations of believers, when it mentions Timothy's mother and grandmother as having 'faith', or rather, 'trust' (*pistis*). 1 Timothy, on the other hand, presupposes a much more developed church hierarchy. In this context it provides advice for bishops and deacons, who are expected to manage their households well, suggesting an analogy between their own *oikoi* and the Christian community that they serve. In Colossians and Ephesians, on the other hand, it is taken for granted that entire households are Christian, and as a consequence, advice is given in so-called household codes to individual groups comprising such households, including husbands, wives, children, slaves and masters (see Col 3:18-4:1 and Eph 5:21-6:9). While from a sociological perspective they provide a helpful insight into the development of early Christian communities, theologically they cannot remain unchallenged in their unproblematic acceptance of the submission of women, children, and slaves.

Concluding comments

As we have seen in this very brief overview, our Scriptures do not provide any simple answers that could help us solve our current problems. Yet the polyphony, or at times, cacophony, of voices in biblical writings must not be too easily silenced. It is perhaps precisely the messiness of human life to which both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament attest so abundantly, and the fact that there is no perfect model that could be followed regardless of the circumstances, that as such are highly instructive. They may serve as a reminder that 'family' values, while important, must not be absolutised, and the debate as to *what* constitutes these values should continue. So must the reflection on what it means to cultivate and pass on one's faith in today's world, a world very different from that two or even three millenia ago. Each generation will have to look for its own answers, in dialogue with, but also by interrogating, some of the biblical texts.

Part Two (JS): Home as *Domestic Church*

I will try to say something that addresses two questions: what does it mean to call the home ‘the domestic church’? and what foundations for faith can be laid in the family?

For most human beings on the planet, the most important thing they do in life is to bring up children. The importance of the job of a mother and father cannot be overestimated. Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has regarded the family as the most influential factor in shaping and nurturing the faith of each generation. The official documents of the church all confirm that parents are the first and primary educators of the faith for their children. Theologians have emphasised the central role of parents in bringing up children in faith. Much of my thinking about this role comes from my own experience as a person who has been married for 48 years, a father of four children (now aged 47, 45, 44 and 32) and grandfather of six more (aged between 23 and 8 years old).

Close proximity, regular touch, constant and unscheduled verbal exchange, mutual accommodation, frequent sharing, rhythms of argument and reconciliation, times of undisguised vulnerability and disappointment punctuated by occasions of elation and celebration – these are all part of the pattern of family life. Each member of the family is recognised for his or her idiosyncrasies, specialness and uniqueness, with a mixture, probably, of appreciation and respect, irritation and tolerance, amusement and wonder. As one Irish educator (I’ve forgotten who) used to say to parents: “Celebrate the child you have, not the child you hoped to have.”

My late, much-loved and much-missed friend, Daniel O’Leary, in one of his articles in *The Tablet*, quotes a mother saying: “I have come to realise everything that serves the life of our home is holy – the daily baths, the messy meals, responding to calls for a drink of water in the middle of the night, the laundry, the bills, the hurting, the forgiving.” Daniel then comments “In the early Christian community, parents were called ‘the priests of the domestic church’ consecrating the daily bread, the nightly tears, the constant sacrifice – these informal, raw and messy sacraments of the home. “The family is where one learns how to love.” He reminds us that Pope Francis recently wrote “Holiness in the family takes on a very ordinary appearance.” This notion that the Christian family is the domestic church is stated clearly in both the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (11) and in the General Directory for Catechesis [255]. John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* also stresses the vital role of parents. Without the family, neither humanity nor faith can flourish. Parents can affect the awakening of the sense of God, the first steps in prayer, education of the moral conscience, formation in the Christian sense of human love as a reflection of God’s love. Such example and teaching, the Directory says, is more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going and daily than structured into periods.

This church teaching is backed up by recent research reports, in this country and elsewhere, about factors that influence whether or not children and young people remain Christian. This research strongly suggest that parents do exert a powerful influence – much more than we sometimes give them credit for. This is especially strong when both parents practice their faith and when the relationship between the parents and between the parents and their children, is stable and warm. This parental influence is greater than any other factor. The influence of grandparents, and indeed the wider family, also plays a positive role in faith formation. The research also shows that contemporary teenagers rather desperately need – in addition to an appropriate amount of personal

‘space’ – connection, support, guidance, instruction, and boundaries – even as they continually renegotiate their transition away from dependence and towards interdependence with adults. This is true for their spiritual development as much as it is true for any other aspect of their personal development. Parents should be encouraged, therefore, to forge strong relationships that incorporate faith rituals, practices and conversations about religious beliefs.

And, not only do parents communicate the Gospel to their children but they also receive the same Gospel from their children. In 1981 John Paul II taught not that the Church shows what the family should be like, but the other way round: the family shows what the Church should be like. We should remember that the family is not holy because it is perfect but because God’s grace is at work in it. And the quality of family life is not guaranteed by the religious faith of parents (even though this matters a huge amount); rather the quality of family life is more influenced by their love – for each other and for their children – and for others.

A really wonderful little book by Ronald Rolheiser that I read recently is called *Domestic Monastery* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2019). It brings out very strikingly something you might find surprising: how similar being a parent is to being a monk. Here is an extract.

To see your own child is to feel what God must feel when God looks at us. Parenting is the most natural path to holiness and maturity; [it often] takes us where we would rather not go. ... among all loves, parental love is perhaps the one that most pulls your heart out of its self-love. Parenting reshapes the core of your being to help you to love more like God loves. ... To be a parent is to nurture a child as he or she passes through very different stages of growth: infancy, toddlerhood, nursery, primary school, a teen with raging hormones and a raging attitude, a young adult, an adult with his or her own responsibilities and unique sorrows. ... Moreover, if you have more than one child, each has a unique personality that you must adapt your love toward. All of this demands that you constantly grow, readjust, adapt, let go, learn to love in a new way. ... To be a parent is to find oneself enrolled in a school of love that is every bit as ascetical and grace-producing as any monastery (pp.63-4, 66).

And another very helpful new book, by Roy Peachey, has these wise words.

One of the trickiest aspects of being a parent is that we simply don’t know how things will turn out. ... What works – or seems to work – for other parents may not work for us. ... To a certain extent, we need to figure it out for ourselves. Even more of a challenge is that we have to keep on figuring it out for ourselves. What works when a child is five may well not work when he or she is ten. What works for one child may not work for a [brother or sister]. ... We might struggle to remember [how fulfilling and ennobling parenthood can be] when our baby has kept us awake all night, when our toddler is kicking off about some minor incident, or when our teenager is resolutely refusing to listen to a word we say. ... What matters is what we do for our children rather than what get out of being parents ... , though, by a divine paradox, wanting the best for our children also brings us great rewards of joy, fulfilment and love. (Roy Peachey, *Did Jesus go to school?* Redemptorist Publications, 2019, pp.44, 53).

In a sense our task is to prepare the soil, irrigate it with love and try to prevent weeds from taking root or from choking or strangling tentative growth. God provides the seed and in plenty. Forced, artificial preparation does not support a resilient and natural development. God is not in a hurry to

'catch' souls. We must not rush to 'achieve results' in this aspect of our lives. There is not a time when everything has to be known, when our vocabulary, or that of our children, has to be complete. Nor is any apparent set-back the last opportunity. Defeats are part of a life-long campaign of retreat and advance, of growth, self-reliance and interdependence.

There is likely to be a strong link between the understanding of faith held by the parents and the way faith is nurtured within the context of their homes. I do not just mean what parents believe but also how they believe; there are different ways of holding or living in a faith. Some people sit more lightly to their faith. Some sit more rigidly. Some continue to grow in maturity with regard to faith. Some get stuck with the faith from their past but this does not match how they have matured in other ways. Some are more questioning about their faith. Others are not willing to question, to face questions and find questioning unsettling and painful. The kind of faith I have will influence how I seek to convey faith at home.

I believe very firmly that the handing on of holy things is inextricably linked to the handling of ordinary things. We sometimes separate what we think is holy or sacred from what is ordinary, as if God was reserved for holy places, holy times, holy people, holy activities. But if God is God, then all places belong to God, all time belongs to God, all people are called to be holy, all actions are open to the grace of God. We do not get to God by passing the ordinary but in how we treat it.

The domestic church is where biology opens up into biography and then into sharing God's life. We start with what earth has given; then with what human hands have made; then we open ourselves to God's transforming love. The family is where community (not on the basis of self-selection – you do not choose the family you were born into) can open up into church. In the domestic church the 'liturgy of life' includes bodily functions (their development and decline), eating and drinking, sexuality, sharing things, play and experiment, reconciliation, disciplining of our affections (learning to love things in the right way), story and celebration. We might say that the curriculum and the syllabus of communicating faith in the home includes: body and touch; food and meals; routine and habit; play and exploration; children and the elderly; celebration and our use of time; conversation and stories. Family life, when it goes well, can offer love and affirmation, example, habits, correction, assumptions, companionship, sharing, celebration, pleasure, relaxation, reinforcing social environment, prayer, stability and continuity, teaching – though almost none of this happens through direct, explicit teaching or any formal language. Insofar as parents can say that they do some combination of the following, then they are already preparing the human soil to receive the Gospel: be present, pay attention, listen, wait, welcome, invite, be hospitable, share, bless, give, forgive, reconcile, heal, celebrate, encourage, be vulnerable, pray.

Children need many things from us parents. These include at least the following: attention, affirmation, time, patience, love, listening to, example, teaching, increasing amounts of independence, forgiveness, correction, protection, encouragement, play, guidance. Children, like all of us, should ultimately be seen, not as a bucket to be filled, or as a problem to be solved or managed, but rather as both a gift to be appreciated and a mystery to enter into.

We won't be perfect parents; I don't think there are such people. Families can be places of conflict, fear, bad example, of confinement and being put down; they can be distressing and diminishing,

places where we get bruised. We need to put the myth of the perfect family out of our minds and focus instead on actual families – and the real good we can do in them. I have tried to adopt an approach which shows a chastened confidence and a hopeful realism about what is possible. Parents genuinely teach a great deal by their approach to daily life, and they need to trust God that their children will grow in Him, both because of, and also often in spite of, their example.

Never underestimate the power of parents to influence their children for good and to witness to their faith through their humble efforts in the midst of the pots and pans, the toys and the tantrums, the cuddles and the confrontations of everyday family life. Nor should we underestimate the influence of our children on the testing, stretching, refining, deepening and expansion of our own character and faith.