

The Family of God.

During cold February it can be tempting to dream of warm summer days, the garden smelling of newly cut grass and the bees busily feeding on nectar in the brilliant blue outside our door. It was a day such as this, seven years ago, that a Sister sat on a rock above the bay at Thurstaton silently contemplating the beauty of the turquoise sea. The sand was dotted with excited dogs and their owners and in the distance, the hills were shrouded in



haze. She was not alone; her arm was around a two-year old black collie-cross who was also silently watching the scene below, his eyes watching every throw of a ball, each eager splash into the water. He didn't move but lent his whole body against her, secure in her hold. Eventually he cautiously explored the area where they were sitting but always keeping a watchful eye on his owner. Even a ball, from which he later became

inseparable, could not tempt him.

Our adopted dog had recently lost his secure and loving home. Even his friend, Lucy, a terrier, who he had faithfully followed everywhere had been left behind. No wonder he was perplexed, despondent and unhappy. He is an intelligent, serious dog and still likes the re-assurance of an arm around him as he contemplates life but he is secure here because he knows that he is loved. The assurance of that love first came by a loving arm around him.

There are times in life when we all need the re-assurance of a hand stretched out lovingly towards us, or a hug. One of the most moving prayers we heard recently was from a terminally ill patient who is a Christian - "Thank you Lord, for your family who don't buckle under when the way becomes tough." To belong to the family of God is a wonderful privilege. We are there for each other when it is needed.

We are a family! One of the things that has impressed us, both at St Mary's and here at Redacre, is that Christianity brings together poor and rich, super-intelligent and very ordinary and the upper and lower classes of society. Those who think, as down to earth Northerners, that the latter doesn't exist should try living in a Hampshire village! Adrian Plass comments in the Introduction to one of his books, "We climb, we descend, we stumble, we stroll happily along the infrequent easy bits, and, if we've got any sense, we lean on each other and accept a helping hand from our brothers and sisters whenever things are just too tricky to manage on our own."¹

We occasionally hear the comment that someone goes to the 8a.m. communion at their parish church because they don't want to be involved with anyone else. That isn't the church. It was John Wesley who said, "There is no such thing as a solitary Christian." Similarly, we often read that some go to Cathedral Services because they do not want to become involved with the Church. To a certain extent we may be able to sympathise with

that, as unfortunately many have had a bad experience of Church and yet are still seeking God and the beauty of the singing, the inspiring building and hopefully, the faithful preaching of God's Word draws them close to Jesus. But even that is a long way from the New Testament meaning of Church, the family of God.

From the moment we become Christian we belong to the family of God. We have no secret signs so that we know each other. In fact, there is nothing secretive at all about this family. There is however, an inner knowing so that wherever we meet, whether that is Timbuktu or New York, there is something within us that knows we have met one of our family. There are many stories told how, in most unlikely places, someone has met another Christian and immediately felt at home. Recently a woman shared with us that she was feeling very isolated at work, as the only Follower of Jesus, when she was approached by another worker who tentatively asked her if she was a Christian. There was a palpable sense of relief that she was no longer alone. The family of God does not function only within the Church Building; in fact it functions better outside it.

When we ourselves receive that loving touch from another, or we reach out in love to a Brother or Sister in Christ, it is as true now, as it was 2000 years ago, "See how these Christians love one another." Perhaps, it should be needless to say that the New Testament would not recognise the unfortunate habit formed in the church of a visit from the church being a visit from the clergy. According to early tradition, St John used to say, "Little children, love one another"- that means us all, the family of God.

¹ When You Walk. Adrian Plass