

Family Group



Family Group by Welsh sculptor Robert Thomas (1926-1999)

I don't know if you have been to The Ealing Broadway Centre in the past week or two? The Centre has been bustling with stalls, selling handbags, wood craft, various gift ideas, and food from different parts of the world. There was quite a buzz about and it felt like a little festival in what is otherwise the rather cold and drab heart of Ealing's shopping mall.

In the centre there is a statue in bronze of a group of people, called Family Group by Welsh sculptor Robert Thomas (1926-1999) There is an identical statue by him in Cardiff. Thomas worked as a lecturer at Ealing Technical College in the 1960s and 1970s, which could explain why he was chosen to provide this sculpture?

Well, as we all know, a Family Group is at the heart of the Christmas story, and any family group presents a potentially fascinating embroidery of exciting peaks and troughs, success and failure, birth and death, love and joy.

The sculpture in Ealing Broadway Centre shows a Mum, a Dad and two kids. Every time I look at it, I feel shocked to see the despondency, the boredom and the depression on their faces, especially the adults. We all know how boring Ealing has become over the past 10 years, especially since Westfield started to take its toll on the Ealing shops, but the vision of family life which this statue provides would put anyone off the idea of being in a family for good!

I went there yesterday, Christmas Eve for some last minute shopping and as I drove I had a little feeling of anticipation, a frisson of excitement even, at what I thought would be a bustling and Christmassy scene. As I descended the staircase, I knew that something was wrong. It all felt different. The Centre square was totally devoid of stalls, or people selling foodstuffs or indeed devoid of any atmosphere at all. The square had returned to its boring, colourless and plain self. Signs of Christmas were almost entirely invisible, and it felt like a bleak February Monday morning.

But, I thought, it is Christmas Eve, and we are reaching the start of the great twelve day festival of the Nativity of Jesus, born in Bethlehem in a stable and laid in a manger!

Its Christmas Eve! I wanted to shout at the bleak scene before me. This is a great festival, so where are the signs of celebration, or even love and joy?

Of course, I should have known better! Christmas in the shops and in the world of commerce and in the pubs and restaurants is not a festival of love and joy. It is a way of making money, and is now almost totally

divorced from its origins back in Bethlehem. I am not, of course, begrudging people the opportunity of making money on the back of a religious festival. People have done that for centuries and the Church gets in on the act a bit as well.

But where is the love and joy in Christmas today?

To answer that question, we need to return to our origins, as we here in church tonight have done, by hearing the narrative of the birth of the baby in Bethlehem and pondering afresh what the meaning and purpose of it all might be for us in our generation, for our lives and the lives of our children.

In order to get to the root of Christmas, you need to look at Easter and see both the beginning of the life of Jesus and the end of it as deeply united in purpose.

The love and the joy of Christmas are found first in the tough commitment of Mary and Joseph to their child, protecting him from all the potential danger he is surrounded by.

The love and joy are found in the parenting of small children and adult children in our dangerous and difficult world today.

The love and joy are found in the commitment of Jesus to his life-task which leads to that final deadly encounter with the Governor of the Judean province of the Roman Empire, Pontius Pilate.

The love and joy are found in the provision of food day by day, year by year mostly by women, for families to eat for nourishment and health.

The love and the joy are found as well in the careful provision of festival foods and gifts which we will all taste later today.

The love and joy are found in the many small acts of self-giving through which we support each other and sometimes go the extra mile to ensure a happy outcome.

The love and the joy are found wherever people think of others carefully and take responsibility.



A detail of Family Group