

Sermon for 29th December 2024, Year C, Christmas I

Preached at St Serf's Shettleson

I Sam 2:18-20,26; Luke 2:41-52

Sermon

In our Gospel story, the city of Jerusalem is beginning to calm down after the great Passover festival, just as we are beginning to calm down after Christmas. The temple is no longer crowded. Visitors have packed their donkeys and headed home, as if leaving a trail of ribbons and wrapping paper behind them. A sense of peace falls again on those whose devotion is a year-round affair. And yet, there in the temple, our camera focuses in on a small scene, where twelve-year-old Jesus is pictured among a circle of old bearded scripture teachers, listening to them and asking questions, demonstrating his understanding. The teachers are no doubt delighted to find such a young man who shares their interests. He perhaps reminds them of the old stories of a young Samuel learning wisdom from Eli hundreds of years earlier.

The main difference from the older story, however, is that while Samuel's parents know where he is and fully approve of his vocation, visiting him each year with a new set of garments, Jesus's parents do not intend to leave him behind at the temple, and they rush back to Jerusalem in a rather understandable panic!

Traditionally, this Sunday, which falls between Christmas and New Year, has been known as the Feast of the Holy Family, with the intention being to portray the small family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus as the model for all Christian families. However, the reading we're given does not exactly show the family of God's Son mirroring the perfect relationships of the Holy Trinity, but a rather more

realistic depiction of a human family with an adolescent child at a chaotic spring festival break among an extended group of relatives.

We're told that Jesus is twelve years old during this escapade, and it's the only biblical story we have that gives us any insight into Jesus's childhood. Last week, he was born, now he's twelve, and apparently causing considerable anxiety for his mum and dad.

Despite there being just this one story between Jesus's birth and the beginning of his adult ministry, it does raise a lot of theological questions about the nature of Jesus as being both fully human and fully divine. Many scholars have poured over it to try to tease out exactly how his divinity and humanity fit together.

On the one hand, Jesus is clearly spiritually very precocious, and already able to hold his own in discussions with the serious teachers of Torah at the temple. But on the other hand, he's apparently lacking empathy for his parents, who, when they come back to Jerusalem to search for him, are met with the rather sullen retort, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" He makes their distress their own problem, not his. There's a magnificent 14th century icon of the scene which depicts Jesus standing with a sullen frown and folded arms staring at his mother while Joseph tells him off. Jesus still has his halo in the icon, but I must admit I have always felt this to be somewhat less than perfectly loving behaviour from the sinless Son of God.

At the same time, for Jesus to be fully human, he also had to grow in wisdom over time, which means that there was a period in the past when his wisdom must have been less developed, and a time in his future when it was more developed. Without this story in the Bible, we might assume that Jesus as a three-year-old was as wise and empathetic as he was at thirty-three. Clearly this was not the case. Jesus increased in wisdom by making mistakes and reflecting on them, just like everyone.

I'm still dubious though about attempts to defend Jesus's behaviour from criticism. Jesus may be the divine Son of God, but I don't think this moment is his finest hour. Of course, it's unclear why Mary and Joseph hadn't checked he was with the family group before they set off for home. It's possible that because Jesus was on the verge of manhood, and the men and women & children travelled in separate groups, each thought he was with the other. Maybe Jesus knew full well that his family were leaving, but chose to ignore them because he wanted 'just one more go in the temple'. Maybe he simply lost track of time, like anyone caught up in something they love. Or maybe Jesus simply didn't know his parents' plans and it was all a miscommunication.

In any case, this story gives hope to messy families of every kind. Even Jesus's family is not gentle and serene. It is full of panic and disagreement and adolescent backchat, and a good scolding in the midst of utter relief. God's Son may be perfect, but there is always room, shall we say, for an increase in perfection.

Along with Jesus's precocious, if gradual, growth in wisdom, this story does give us a few other insights into his childhood. For a start, Joseph is still alive. We know he is no longer mentioned when Jesus starts his ministry, but here he is still very much part of Jesus's life, and he is described by Mary as Jesus's father. For this reason, and because the episode uses fewer Jewish expressions than the story of Jesus's birth, some scholars think that the passage may have come from a separate source which doesn't know about the Virgin birth, and Luke simply inserted it into his Gospel to fill the gap in his narrative.

The lack of any further Biblical insights into Jesus's childhood proved to be an irresistible temptation for other Early Church writers to try to fill. There exists, for example, a very early manuscript called the 'Infancy Gospel of Thomas' which was first referred to in the late 2nd century and immediately condemned as 'spurious and apocryphal' by the Church Father, Irenaeus. It is nevertheless

fascinating to see what early Christians thought might be going on for Jesus as he grew up.

The text describes the life of Jesus from the age of five to twelve, concluding with this story about Jesus in the temple. It portrays Jesus more as a sort of morally immature superhero learning to use and occasionally misuse his powers. One of the episodes involves Jesus making clay birds and bringing them to life on the Sabbath, something that also appears in the Islamic Quran. In a less wholesome incident, a very young Jesus is supposed to have cursed a boy who has bumped into him, causing the boy to die. When their neighbours complain, Jesus strikes them blind. Another story has him raising a young friend from the dead after a fatal fall from a rooftop, mainly so the boy could confirm that the accident wasn't Jesus's fault.

These sorts of infancy stories were not uncommon in ancient times. Similar stories are told of the Buddha in India, Osiris in Egypt, Cyrus the Great in Persia, and Augustus Ceasar in Rome. The surprising thing is not that we have one such story in the Bible, but that it is comparably restrained, with no random cursing of people who annoy Jesus, but a clear focus on showing that Jesus is already dedicated to Jewish traditions and teachings, and obedient to the Law. The story that gets included is not one emphasising Jesus's divine powers, but the one emphasising his very clear humanity.

So, we learn that even for Jesus, growth in wisdom takes time. When he is twelve, he behaves like a twelve-year-old. He was not born a wise old man in a baby's body. Wisdom is not miraculously bestowed, even in Jesus Christ. For all of us of every age, the only way to grow in wisdom is to listen to good teachers, and occasionally perhaps to do things that are not entirely wise, and then to learn from the inevitable consequences.