

Christmas 1C, December 27th 2009.

1 Samuel 2:18-20; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2: 41-52

Growing in Wisdom and Stature

As we move past our Christmas celebrations, towards a new year, where do we go after the wonder has faded? How do we stretch the “thin moment” of Christ’s coming to the world and to us? What can we glean from today’s Gospel to help us?

We know very little – almost nothing – about the first thirty years of Jesus’ life. Luke’s Gospel this week records the only canonical story we have about these “hidden” years between Jesus’ birth and his public ministry.

Luke, alone of all the Gospels, gives us the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Jerusalem temple. Luke writes that every year Joseph and Mary made the 150-mile roundtrip from Nazareth to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, about twenty miles into the return trip home to Nazareth, his parents discovered that Jesus was missing from their caravan of family and friends. After a second day to return to Jerusalem, on the third day they found the boy Jesus in the temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” When Mary rebuked him it became apparent that Jesus was not accidentally lost, but that he had deliberately stayed behind: “Didn’t you know that I had to be in my Father’s house?” Mary and Joseph didn’t understand this mysterious response. After their safe return to Nazareth Jesus “was obedient to them. . . [He] grew in wisdom and years –or in stature, as a better translation puts it - and in favour with God and man” (cf. 2:40 and 1 Samuel 2:26).

In this story, Luke reminds us that Jesus was a normal boy who experienced genuine human development—physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. [This was to become an important reminder for the early church. In the centuries after Jesus, fables and fanciful legends grew around Jesus’ early or “hidden” years, that made him out to be something more than human and which served to obscure his real humanity. There’s animals who speak at Jesus’ nativity (*Infancy Gospel of Matthew*). In the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. 140–170), Jesus turns clay pots into flying birds. Then there’s Jesus’ nappy that heals people (used or unused?), and his sweat that cures leprosy (*Arabic Infancy Gospel* -sixth century?). Other fables claim that when Jesus was twelve he sailed to England with Joseph of Arimathea and built a church near Glastonbury to honour his mother Mary, or that between the ages of twelve to thirty he studied in India, Persia, or Tibet.

The early church wasn’t gullible or naive enough to believe these fables about Jesus. Instead, it followed the lead of the gospel writers by contenting itself with ignorance and silence about Jesus’ early years.]

Luke also emphasises the role and significance of the Temple and its community in Jesus’ life. Throughout the Gospel there is a stress on the rituals and acts of worship and communal interaction that lie at the heart of the religious community.

Rev Robyn Boyd, Anglican Church of the Ascension, Burwood East, Vic.

The very fact that Luke presents Jesus in the temple at this stage of his life says there is an important role for temple –or church- in the life of faith. Ritual matters; acts of worship and the accompanying communal interaction that lie at the heart of the religious community matters. All of this is integral to growing in wisdom and stature.

Our spiritual growth is a lifelong experience of questioning, and it's reassuring to know that Jesus grew, too, for as one Christian commentator writes "there is no getting around the fact, that not only is there character development for Jesus in the Gospels, but also Jesus had to struggle to think about who he was and who he should be" (Timothy Mulder, *New Proclamation 2009*).

But there's more to this than simply figuring out who we are or what we must do. There is the question of maturity, and the challenge for us in a new year may be to resolve to deepen our maturity in faith, to grow in wisdom and stature. For example, as with young Jesus in the temple, would anyone find us in church, discussing the things that really matter? Do we simply read the Bible the same way we might have read it as children, or are we continuing to grow into an adult, informed, inquisitive and open approach to Scripture, using the tools scholars have given us and seeking the guidance of the Spirit of God? Are we open to where that might lead us? As we seek for Jesus this year, perhaps it is Jesus who will find – and use – us.

Growing in wisdom and stature calls us to take our faith seriously enough to study scripture, wrestle with traditional theological doctrines, explore new images of God, Christ, and salvation, and spend time in prayer, meditation, and service. A growing faith is not accidental, but requires going to the “temple” regularly to listen, ask, and share.

As Christians, we are called to be “large-souled persons.” In Philippians, the apostle Paul describes this process of becoming a Christian “mahatma” as having “the mind of Christ.” The reading from Colossians today provides similar guidance for those who wish to experience the world with the spirit of Christ. Christian growth integrates spirituality, theology, and ethics. “Clothe yourselves with compassion . . . clothe yourselves with love.” In other words, let your face to the world, reflecting your deepest theological insights, be one of loving relatedness. To have the mind of Christ is to see Christ in everyone and treat everyone as if he or she is Christ’s beloved.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Take time to listen to Christ in prayer and meditation, and in reflecting on the Scriptures. When we develop an attentiveness to God , a greater awareness of him in all things, we hear and respond to that inner word of God in ourselves and all things.

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” The omnipresence of God is one of the most practical doctrines of the church. It reminds us that God is everywhere, and that we are always on “holy ground” and always encountering “holy people.” Remember there is no such thing ordinary time, ordinary place, or ordinary people. God is in all. By all our encounters, we bring beauty or ugliness to God’s experience of the world.

Finally, “let the peace of Christ dwell in your hearts.” Peace involves the expansion of the self beyond its typical boundaries to embrace the well-being of others and the planet. In the peace that passes understanding, we participate in eternity, growing beyond “us” and “them” by befriending the universe. Today, growing in wisdom and stature is, experiencing a larger self, is not just a matter of personal joy, but planetary survival.

What we need at the turn of the year is “stature.” On this “slow” or “low” Sunday, we can commit ourselves to digging deeper into the spiritual life in Christ. We can commit ourselves to daily practices of stature – to daily reflection and connectedness to God, to radical hospitality and welcome, to a growing understanding of God through study, and to service that changes the world. Then, we will grow with Jesus, and we will feel the spirit of the incarnation throughout the year, not just at Christmas, for we will, “grow in wisdom and stature and favour with God and humankind.”

How about it?

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