

Sermon for Christmas 1: 27th December 2009

A turning point for Mary and Jesus

Luke 2:41 – end and Colossians 3:12-17

Do you remember what Christmas was like when you were a child? Everything was somehow bigger and more wonderful, wasn't it? There was always snow, and it was never as cold or troublesome as it's been this year. Things are always awesome when you're a child, and there's nothing to worry you. I read somewhere recently that you shouldn't be concerned about the size of the Christmas tree you've got this year, because in the eyes of a child they're all 30ft tall.

But time flies past and we grow up, and Christmas sometimes turns into a bit of an anti-climax after all.

This year time has really flown more than usual. Two days ago we celebrated the birth of our Lord Jesus into the world as a helpless baby. Today he's twelve years old and displaying distinctly teenager-ish behaviour. That's growing up fast!

Within 20 verses in Luke's gospel, which we'll be following throughout this year, Jesus has gone from being an 8-day old baby being presented at the Temple in Jerusalem by his proud but bewildered parents, to now presenting himself at the Temple aged 12, probably for his bar mitzvah, the coming-of-age ritual at which a Jewish boy becomes a man. Jesus engages in a question-and-answer session with the religious teaches which astonishes them. Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph are travelling home to Nazareth with the great crowd that has come down to Jerusalem for the passover festival. They assume Jesus is with friends or relatives in the crowd, and it's not until bed time, when they call him in for the night, that they realise he's missing. Can you imagine the anguish? If you've ever lost a child, even if only for a minute, I'm sure you can remember what it's like.

Their reaction is to search for him frantically. And when they find him, Mary's response is just what you'd expect from an anxious parent. 'Where were you? Why did you worry us like that?' And Jesus' reaction? Just the same as most 12 year old boys, Jesus was experimenting with rebelliousness and asserting his independence, and he answered his parents back: 'Where did you think I'd be? I'm doing my Father's work'.

This is a turning point, not only for Jesus, but for Mary too. Perhaps she began to learn what all parents have to learn, that our children are independent people who have their own identity before God. Of course, Jesus' relationship with God is unique and in this gospel passage we're seeing it just begin to unfold as he begins to realise who his is. And Mary's role, from here, will turn from parent to servant as Jesus comes into his true ministry. At this point she can't understand the journey she will make, all she can do is hold these things in her heart until she grows in understanding.

When we welcome Jesus into our lives, we assume that we'll take him with us into all our activities, church and non-church things, wherever we go and whatever we do, just like Mary did when Jesus was a small child, just as any parent does. But becoming a mature Christian means letting Jesus take us wherever he wants to go, which is often way beyond our expectations. It means taking on that commitment to a life like that described by St Paul in our reading from Colossians: a life ruled by love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another in love, even when we'd rather wash our hands of each other; forgiving one another when we have not one ounce of forgiveness in us. That is the life of Christian maturity for which we strive, for which we pray.

Just as Mary and Joseph did, we take it for granted that Jesus is with us, and blesses our busyness, even though we've not spent much time with him recently. We lose him on the way, just as Mary and Joseph lost the 12 year old Jesus on the way. And it's not really him who gets lost, it's us. We've gone the wrong way, we've gone away from God and have got lost. And when we find ourselves in that position, we could do worse than follow Mary and Joseph's example and look for Jesus with all our heart, determined to find him. Mary and Joseph found him in the Temple, in God's presence. Perhaps we might find him as we commit to daily prayer, worship and bible reading.

And when we find him again, we might find that he challenges us to see him and serve him in a new way, to understand him more deeply, as Mary did.

The question today's gospel has for us, immediately after Christmas is, do we want to keep Jesus an innocent and helpless child in our lives, the baby in the manger? Or do we dare let Jesus grow up in our lives, with all the challenges to our expectations that will bring, and with all the pain that will bring as we understand that our role is to be like this servant Lord.

As we face 2010, do we dare let Jesus grow up in us, so that this coming year we can grow up in him? Do we dare ask him to help us grow in maturity of faith that we may be known as his people in this community? Do you dare?

Blessings
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