

Luke 2:41-52; Hebrews 5:7-10

30.01.18

He increased in wisdom and in years

It's one of the frustrations of the accounts we have of Jesus' life that we are told hardly anything about his childhood. We have the stories of his birth, and then the start of his ministry – and in between just this small snippet, this incident when Jesus was twelve years old. In other books that never made it into the New Testament – for good reason - we find some rather bizarre stories from Jesus' childhood. We find Jesus making birds out of mud and then clapping his hands and watching them fly away; or we find him helping his father in his carpenter's shop, and stretching a piece of wood which is too short for its purpose. Here Jesus is like a magician performing tricks (and it has to be said Jesus comes across as a right little brat). In the more conventional, 'authorised' Gospel accounts, however, this incident in the temple is all we have. Maybe, however, it gives us more to chew on than appears at first sight.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus have come up to Jerusalem for the Passover, one of the three annual feasts that Jews were expected to attend and Jesus is now twelve, the age when he would move from childhood into adolescence and adulthood. And the first thing we notice is how embedded Jesus is in Jewish traditions, in the ancient stories and practices of Israel. Take the temple, where Jesus is found by his parents. The temple loomed large in the Jewish faith. It was the focal point and the central symbol of the entire faith and life of the Jews. Later on Jesus will have some very critical things to say about the temple – he sees it in fact as a symbol of all that is wrong in the life of his people, all the ways in which they are resisting the things that make for peace. And so he saw it as earmarked for destruction. But for now Jesus submits to the regime of the temple, attending it dutifully and engaging with the elders and teachers of the faith, discussing the ancient traditions, listening and answering questions. And this is crucial for Jesus. You see one feature of Jesus that I think we underestimate is how creative a thinker he was. We tend to think of Jesus as a great teacher who dispensed timeless truths to his followers about how life should be lived, how we should love one another and show justice and compassion – none of which is particularly original. But what is missing from that account is the way in which Jesus was embedded in his Jewish context, steeped in the faith of his fore-fathers and mothers, and how he reshaped and

reinterpreted all that. To take one example. I've mentioned the temple and its centrality to the faith of his people. But Jesus radically reinterpreted the temple. He identified himself as the true temple, as the true meeting place of God and his people. And while the temple was the place for sacrifices and for atonement between God and his people and where forgiveness was dispensed, Jesus saw himself as the true location for all that. This is an extraordinary claim – scandalous! – and it was an act of freewheeling imagination and creativity on Jesus' part. But in order to make such huge interpretive leaps Jesus had to know his stuff – he had to know inside out the traditions of his faith that he was recasting and reinventing. Jesus is like a great jazz musician who is able to engage in soaring flights of improvisation – but in order to do that he needs to know the rubrics, the basics, he needs to be rooted in the tradition. And that is what brings him to the temple. And there is a beautiful saying of Jesus where he likens the Kingdom of Heaven to the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old – the new shines forth from out of the old.

This brings us to what I think is the heart of this passage and the phrase that I want very much to focus on, and it comes at the end of the passage where we read, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years...' Note that – Jesus increased in wisdom, he grew in understanding. Being able to improvise and to innovate as Jesus did requires growth and development and perfecting. It takes time. It involves mastery of your craft and that requires disciplined learning, years of study and reflection, sitting at the feet of learned people, attending the synagogue and hearing the Scriptures explained. Through all that Jesus grew in wisdom – in his ability to spin the new out of the old.

In this respect this passage connects with our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. I've spoken of how Jesus completely re-envisioned the temple, reinterpreting it, and this passage builds on that. It presents Jesus as the true high priest in the temple – in other words the one who offers up to God prayers on our behalf. And we are told here that in his life amongst us Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears and that 'he learned obedience through what he suffered.' Now, what does that mean – that Jesus learned obedience? Wasn't he always obedient? Indeed is that not why he stayed behind here in the temple when Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem – out of obedience to the one who he called Father and in whose house he must be

found? Well, yes – but Jesus still had much to learn, and that came through his suffering and his compassionate sharing in the lives of others.

So, let's dig a little deeper and understand that the wisdom that we are told Jesus grew in is very practical. It's not just theoretical understanding. It's not just head knowledge. Wisdom comes when learning and understanding meet action and behaviour – and there are plenty of people who are very learned and clever but who are not very wise. And I would dare to say that in this passage Jesus has something to learn about wise behaviour. Mary and Joseph, after all, might be forgiven for leaving Jesus behind in the temple – these were the days of the extended family when people travelled in groups and Jesus' parents could reasonably assume that Jesus was with friends, with another family. But Jesus – I am not so sure about. Should he have just remained behind in the temple, without a word to his parents, without letting them know where he was? Without recourse to a mobile phone, should he not have communicated better? Can we not sympathise with Mary and Joseph in their panic, their exasperation, 'Child, why have you treated us like this...?' Did Jesus not have something to learn here, about obedience and practical wisdom? And when we read towards the end of the story that 'he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them', might there be an implication that Jesus had learnt a lesson here?

So maybe this incident in the temple furnishes us with a word on this last Sunday of this year, as we look ahead to 2019. Being a Christian is about growing. It's about a faith journey, a pilgrimage in which we learn and increase in wisdom, understanding and obedience – as Jesus did. I find it interesting to notice the language that is used of 'religious' people. We are described sometimes as 'believers', or as 'people of faith'. But these are very static terms. You're a believer or an unbeliever, or an agnostic. You either have faith or you don't. It's like being superstitious – you either are or you're not. But the Bible doesn't talk about believers or people of faith. It talks about disciples. And disciples are called on a journey and it's a journey of learning and growth and developing. I like the idea of being a 'practicing Christian' – in the same sense that you practice the piano or an actor practices her lines: practice makes perfect, as you work at it. I love the quote by the American writer, Maya Angelou, about her faith. She says, 'I'm grateful to be a practicing Christian. I'm always amazed when people say, 'I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already?' It's an

ongoing process. You know, you keep trying. And blowing it and trying and blowing it.’

That brings us to one last image to conclude with. In this story Mary and Joseph are searching for Jesus. They know he’s there, somewhere and for three days they search for him. Think of that – three days searching in the backstreets and hidden corners of Jerusalem. And eventually they find him – and what have they learnt in the process about Jesus, their son? And so this story is all about searching: Jesus is searching for wisdom and understanding – and Mary and Joseph are searching for Jesus. And this is a picture for the life of faith. Something in us is searching – searching for meaning, searching for understanding, searching for a handle on the mysteries of life, searching for truth – and it all becomes focused on Jesus Christ. And what is so beautiful about the Gospel is that it proclaims that we are found – we are found by a God who has searched us out. And that gives us confidence, assurance: ‘I once was lost but now I’m found!’. But at the same time we are still searching, still searching for Jesus, delving into truth in an attempt to fathom it, still restless. And again, what is so beautiful about our faith is that it can be grasped by a child – there is a simplicity about it... and yet it is deeper than the greatest mind can ever fathom and we never get close to comprehending it. As one great Christian thinker put it, the Christian life is always one of ‘faith seeking understanding’ – seeking deeper insight, deeper understanding, deeper wisdom. And please God may that give us a humility and an openness to the insights of others lest we ever presume to think that we’ve got it all sussed.

So, on this last Sunday of the year, with this text, I would leave you with a question. Are you growing in the faith? Have you progressed in wisdom and understanding from last year? Is your faith static? Opportunities abound here in this church for growth – one striking recent development in the life of this church is the plethora of discussion groups, Bible Studies, places where the faith is explored and questions raised and wrestled with. Never before has Christian education been so much a part of my ministry – and I love it - and I’m learning all the time. And out-with this church there is so much online and in social media and in Christian publishing - huge resources for learning.

Jesus grew in wisdom and in obedience. May we be like him in the coming year. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
all glory and honour be yours
on this last Sunday of the year,
this turning of time from one year to another.
We praise you and thank you for your faithfulness
throughout the years,
for bringing us to this point in our lives,
for you provision of our needs and
for all the blessings which another year has brought.
And we praise you for our pilgrimage of faith,
for our journey into truth and understanding,
for all the ways you lead us and shape us,
opening our hearts and minds to your truth.
Forgive us we pray that at times we are slow to learn;
forgive us that we are set in old ways,
in old mindsets and old habits,
resistant at times to your truth.
O God in your patience forgive us.
Reassure us of your grace and perseverance with us
and grant that we may know you more clearly,
love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly
in faithful obedience.
We pray in Jesus' name and in his words we pray
together, saying...