

Day by Day Like Him We Grow

A sermon on Luke 2:41-52 & Colossians 3:12-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 27 December 2015

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Message

We grow into the likeness of Christ as we model ourselves on him, and he is a model of growth rather than a model of static perfection.

Sermon

Now that the Christmas trees are being discarded to the nature strip and they've stopped playing schmaltzy versions of Christmas carols in the supermarkets, we are a lot more free to get into the Word of God and explore what the stories of the birth of Jesus have to say to us as his followers. The summer solstice festival known as Christmas finally ended two days ago. The Church's Festival of the Nativity, also known as Christmas, only began that day, and we will now enjoy it at our leisure until the Feast of Epiphany in ten days time.

It is interesting to note that the stories of Jesus' birth and infancy do not get a mention in the earliest Christian writings. The earliest gospel written, the Gospel according to Mark, begins with Jesus' baptism somewhere around the age of thirty. The Apostle Paul who wrote earlier still didn't endeavour to write a gospel narrative of the life of Jesus, but he could still have made mention of the birth of Jesus and the circumstances surrounding it if he saw it as important to do so, but he doesn't. Not a mention. The Gospel according to John is probably the last written, and it has no stories of the birth or infancy either. Only Matthew and Luke include such stories. And the story we heard today, of Jesus around twelve years of age, is told only by Luke. Now that doesn't, by any means, mean that it is not important. Instead, it suggests that it's importance may be of particular relevance to issues that had emerged a bit later in the church that Luke had in mind as he wrote. And as I reflected on it this week, I began to wonder whether one of the things Luke was facing as a pastor was something I know very well and face all the time.

This thing is something I hear so often from so many of you that when I describe it, quite a few of you are going to think I'm picking on you and preaching about you specifically. And so one of the things I need you to hear even before I describe it is that I could have retired to a yacht in the Bahamas by now if I had a dollar for every time this sort of thing comes up in pastoral conversations. It is not you, individually, whoever you are. It is most of you collectively most of the time. So what is it? It is a conversation where one of you says to me, "Geez I'm hopeless. I get so mad at myself and I try really hard but I still don't seem able to be what I want to be and know I should be, and I just hate it and feel so discouraged and feel like giving up. I can't forgive myself." And then I reply by saying, "Look back a year or two and see how far you've come. Not bad huh?!" And then sometimes some of you feel a little bit better and sometimes some of you just continue to beat yourselves up because you can only see the seemingly endless distance in front of you and you refuse to look back and give yourself credit for the distance already covered. See, it's not just you. There are lot of sheepish smiles around the room at this moment!

So what has this got to do with today's readings? Or what do today's readings have to say to this? Well, there is an idea made explicit in tonight's story of the twelve year old Jesus which was, and to some extent still is a bit controversial. That controversy may even help explain why many of early writers showed no interest in exploring the stories of Jesus as a youngster.

You see, the idea that God could become human was scandalous enough, but the idea that God could become a snotty little baby and then a bratty, if somewhat precocious, little kid was a bit too much for some theologians to get their heads around. Because if God became a baby, then that would mean that God had a lot of growing up to do. That would mean that God had to mature and develop and grow like the rest of us do. And theologically, that raises lots of curly questions about what it means when we say that Jesus was flawless, sinless, perfect. But tonight's reading said it quite explicitly, "Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and with people." And just in case you missed it, the first reading said almost word for word the same thing about Samuel when he was a boy. So together they are telling us that Jesus had to grow up, just like Samuel, just like anybody else. Jesus didn't arrive as some ready-formed model of perfect maturity. Like us, he had to learn to walk before he could run. And yet when I sit with many of you, I'm constantly hearing you beating yourselves up for not being able to run before you can walk!

Yes, we are called to model ourselves on Jesus. As we sang earlier, "he is our life's true pattern." But as the carol continues, "tears and smiles like us he knew. From a baby, weak and helpless, day by day like us he grew." Modelling ourselves on Jesus does not mean aiming for the completely unattainable and then despairing and beating ourselves up for failing to reach the standard. Instead, modelling ourselves on Jesus and following Jesus are more or less the same thing. We set our course to follow his course. We start from somewhere like where he starts — from a baby weak and helpless — and follow him on the same sort of journey of growth. The journey has its ups and downs, its obstacles and its catch-ups. Sometimes it is picking up speed, and sometimes it is slumped by the side of the road, feeling unable to go on. But Jesus slumped by the side of the road three times on the way to the cross too. The times of exhaustion and frustration and fear do not mean that you've taken the wrong turn and are lost forever. Resurrection might be only three days away.

And there is another thing I often hear that is related to this and also related to tonight's readings. When you're not beating yourselves up for still not having arrived at Destination Perfection, many of you are dismissing the progress you have made as not really being genuine. "It might look like I've improved a bit," you say, "but I'm only putting it on. I might be treating them okay on the surface, but inside I still want to punch their lights out." And by such things you seek to persuade me that you really are beyond the pale and perhaps beyond hope of redemption. But did you hear what the Apostle said in the reading we heard from the letter to the Colossians? "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved..." Hear that? That's just a given. You are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. The same description that is used of Jesus is used of you as a given. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Or clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. "Above all, clothe yourselves with love," or put on love "which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

So don't come telling me that because you're only putting it on, it's not worth a cracker! That's what you are supposed to do! Put it on. That's how you start on making the change. Those of you who have watched children grow up should get this. One day they are "putting on" your grown-up clothes as dress-ups, and in the blink of an eye they've grown out of them. But "putting them on" was part of the process of growing up. They make believe at being grown up in order to progress in the journey of actually growing up. Maybe, in part, that's what Jesus was doing when he was left behind talking with the biblical scholars at the temple: pretending to be a grown up interpreter of God's word himself. Trying it on to see how it felt

and growing into being the real thing. Discovering that he had a knack for this sort of thing and finding his vocation unfolding before him as he did.

There is nothing wrong with “putting it on”. It beats the hell out of “putting it off”! Keep putting it on, and when it slips put it on again, and one day you will realise that you are no longer putting it on. You will have grown to fit it. It will now be you. Day by day like him we grow. So if there is one Christmas gift I would wish for you all this Christmas, it is the realisation, deep in your bones, that having a lot of growing up still to do does not in any way invalidate your journey as a follower of Jesus, or your status as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, but as long as you are continuing to look to Jesus and day by day grow like him, then you are faithfully following him, and the miracle of Christmas is alive and taking shape within you.