

## NORMAL DAYS

Luke 2:22-40

Philippians 2:1-11

Christmas is not over, but for many of us it feels that it is. The big day, the dinner, the presents, many of the family visits and most of the special services are all past. We have the excitement of New Year coming up, of course, but that is much more of a secular excitement. For Christians the big explosion of Christmas is dying down now, even although we know that we are still in the Christmas season.

I wonder if you feel let down? Are you sorry it is over, or perhaps sorry that it didn't go as you had hoped or planned? Or perhaps you are relieved - there's a lot of expectation around Christmas Day, and it can be stressful. Or maybe you are just glad to have had this Christmas time, and having appreciated the big excitement, you are now appreciating the quieter time. I hope so.

In the gospels, and particularly in Luke, which has so much about the events of Christ's coming recorded, there is a sense of coming back to normality after the drama. We read today the last event of the Christmas story which Luke records: the presentation in the temple. It would be a lot easier to do this from Bethlehem than from Nazareth. I expect Mary and Joseph were pleased that they were still in the south when they had to go to Jerusalem. They take baby Jesus, they offer the offering of poverty, and they are once more overwhelmed by God's provision of recognition to reassure them and tell that this is indeed the Son of God who was promised, not just any old (or new) baby.

Simeon and Anna speak their words of prophecy - not all of it comfortable listening for Mary - and then the family go home. There is no mention in Luke of any sojourn in Egypt. And then what? "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him." (v:40)

And that's it. No more miracles, no more interventions by God, no more drama. This one sentence covers a huge period of life, perhaps as much as twelve years, and acts as a bridge until the story is recounted by Luke of the visit of Jesus to temple aged twelve. This phrase "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him" is important. Here we are told about the lack of unusual events in his early years. He is totally immersed in ordinary human life.

Later writers, writing well after the gospels were in circulation, obviously felt cheated by this lack of incident, and they invented stories such as the child Jesus making clay birds and making them fly, or detailing how his bathwater could save a dying baby, or how his smile would bring out the sun. They also told more gruesome stories, but there is no foundation for any of this. It was as though some believers simply couldn't believe the real truth: that Jesus really was one of us, and grew up and learned just like any of us. Nothing is recorded because there is nothing more Luke needs to say to make this point. The gospels are not intended to be biographies of Jesus.

The primary purpose of the gospels is not to provide us with information for its own sake, but to give us the information we need to provoke transformation. They are both a revelation and an invitation. They proclaim that the time of waiting has been fulfilled and that God's reign is at hand, and they summon us to repent, to change our minds and our hearts, and the direction of our lives, and believe the good news of salvation. The

absence of details about Jesus' childhood is a reminder that ultimately the gospel is about us and our response to the call of Christ. The evangelist does not tell us stories for the sake of stories, just to entertain us, or to satisfy our curiosity. The gospels are written to confront and convict us, to convert and comfort us, and only those instances and details that may have these effects have become part of the tradition handed on from earliest preachers to the authors of the gospels and from the gospel writers to ourselves.

The absence of exciting and unusual stories about Jesus younger years does suggest one thing about this period. It was probably quite normal. It would be quite typical of the life of any young person growing up in that time. After the dramatic events surrounding his birth, Luke tells us that Jesus and his family "returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth". They withdrew into the humdrum obscurity of daily life in their rural village, into the customary routines of daily life, the rhythms that marked the lives of friends and neighbours and relations. They shared the struggles and celebrations of their own particular time and place as much as the other families of Nazareth and the rest of Galilee. We can be sure if any unusual events had been associated with the family of Joseph the carpenter, the people of Nazareth would not have been so perplexed by the sudden emergence of Jesus as a powerful preacher and wonder-worker some years later. Jesus and his family would be immersed in the experiences common to the people he met every day. The sheer ordinariness of Jesus youth, so ordinary that it could be summed up in a single sentence, was undoubtedly the best preparation for his extraordinary ministry. He needed to know people as they are, to be one of the community to whom he would minister.

The very silence of the gospels about these years is a reassuring hint that Jesus grew up as much as we all do. He observed human life, the birds of the air and lilies of the field, the farmer at work and the natural world around him. He learned to deal with people as they actually are. He watched in fascination as Joseph turned raw wood into useful household creations, and Jesus learned early on to imitate his industry and skill. He responded with wonder and delight to the world, naturally and human, societal and familial, in which he found himself, and through which he discovered himself and began to understand his vocation.

"The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him."

This one short sentence, the sort of thing that we might consider a throw-away line, is actually very important in its contribution to the gospel message as a whole. Jesus grew: and this is a crucially important observation, because it is an affirmation of Jesus full humanity, of his total identification with the human condition and with all who share it. The growth and strength Luke mentions here certainly include the physical, he was doing all the usual growing that boys do: bones getting longer and firmer, muscles growing stronger, eyes and ears learning to be useful, and mind growing and expending. He was trying out his strength, and asking his questions, and watching and thinking and drawing his own conclusions about people and about life.

His understanding of God would be growing as well, just as those of us who bring

our children up in faith see theirs taking root and burgeoning, sometimes in surprising ways. This verse is important because it emphasizes the full meaning of the incarnation. It reminds us that Jesus is not God walking around in human disguise, but human inside as well as out, fully and truly human, just as surely as he is truly and fully divine. This is hard to get your head around, indeed it is a mystery that no one has completely fathomed or explained, but one that Christians in the past twenty centuries have joyfully affirmed. Luke reminds us that in sharing our humanity, Jesus shared our way of learning through experience.

So we need not be sorry that the explosion of Christmas joy is over for another year. We need not shrink from the boring normality of life. Jesus knew years and years of normality - indeed, even in his brief years of ministry there must have been much that remained normal for him. By coming among us, and more than that, becoming one of us, he hallowed the normal. He made it as holy as the unusual. George Herbert said in one of his hymns "Who sweeps a room as for your laws makes that and the action fine." And that is it. By living all of our normal days and hours remembering Christ being one of us and now being with us, things may still be normal. But nothing now is profane. Jesus has touched human life and all of it is holy.

This week we will go on to embrace the challenges and possibilities of a New Year. Let us do so remembering that each moment of each day is holy, made so by the incarnation, the becoming human of Jesus and the experiences of ordinary life which he shared with us.