

St Peter's Church, Pilning

Cross Hands Road, Pilning, BS35 4JB

10am Sunday 29 December 2024

Lectionary:

1 Samuel 2:18-20,26

Psalm 148

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:41-52

Sermon

Babies

Babies are safe

They're not really the sort to cut people's hands off

(although Bin Laden once wore nappies)

They just aren't given to causing world wars

(although someone once said 'I christen this child Adolf')

They show no particular desire to murder their political opponents

(but even Netanyahu once played with his toes)

The trouble with babies is that they have this annoying tendency to grow up

They refuse to stay cuddly, they start to ignore teddy

They insist on learning things that it would be nicer for them not to learn.

Perhaps that's why we like to make a big fuss over Christmas and the baby Jesus, who we can safely tuck up away in a manger for another year.

Unable to do us any real harm

That way he's just a baby whose grown up words will not make us feel guilty or uncomfortable.

That way we can safely forget what we did to him when he grew up.

(Simon Jenkins)

Christmastide is nothing if not a rollercoaster.

Within just four days, the Church's calendar throws us from the joy of Jesus' birth into the barbaric stoning of St Stephen, then through the light of St John the Evangelist into the atrocity inflicted on the Holy Innocents and their families.

Our lectionary offers no better time than Christmastide to reflect on the three strands of celebration, suffering and childhood – our own and others' – which are woven together into our common human experience.

On Friday just gone, on the eve of Holy Innocents Day, UNICEF published a report entitled [Children Under Attack](#), which opens with these words: "By almost every measure, 2024 has been one of the worst years on record for children living in conflict zones in

UNICEF's history. More than one in six children globally now live in areas affected by conflict, forced to face unthinkable violations." We could easily spend a day considering this statement alone.

And then this Sunday, we are suddenly pitched 12 years on, into the remarkable events of a visit to the Temple by Jesus, whose birth and boyhood parallel so much of Samuel's early life.

In today's readings, it is the children, Jesus and Samuel, who teach the priests and scholars, and not the other way round. The adult Jesus himself later tells his followers, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

Note the important phraseology here – we are called to be child-like... this is a mile away from child-ish. Childlikeness is what we are encouraged to emulate. This is something we should always be open to, for it is they, and not we, who will face the challenge of building a better world than the one we pass on to them.

It is important to note that in the culture and time of Jesus, a 12 year old would not be considered a 'child' in the way that we would nowadays. Even now, at the age of 13 a Jewish boy becomes an 'adult'. Jesus is therefore in this story flexing his growing independence from his parents.

Having grown up through the Boys' Brigade, I was naturally drawn to the last verse of our Luke reading. Our reader this morning read from the New Revised Standard Version, but I learned the Revised Standard Version;

"And Jesus increased in Wisdom and in Stature and in favour with God and Man"

The first thing that strikes me is the similarity between this and the last verse of our reading from 1 Samuel;

"Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people."

This would not have been lost on Jewish readers of Luke's Gospel who would recognise the allusion.

In both cases the point is to note that the now quasi-adult Jesus is developing in his own right,

The reason this verse is important to the Boys' Brigade is that it was the foundation of the 'achievement scheme' for junior section – the badge programme.

It is balanced by the four sided development of

- Education (Jesus' wisdom)
- Physical (Jesus' stature)
- Spiritual (favour with God) and
- Social (favour with man)

Unless we develop ourselves, and our children, as fully rounded people we cannot properly relate to and serve God.

If we do not look after our physical needs – to feed, clothe, keep ourselves healthy and at least reasonable fit, then we cannot work for God.

Likewise, if we are uneducated (aka stupid) then we cannot properly represent God to others, defend our faith or express ourselves sufficiently.

If we focus exclusively on our personal spirituality, we might develop an element of favour with God (although I struggle with any idea we might ‘earn’ rightness with God), but we will be of little practical use – remember the phrase “they are so heavenly minded, they are of no earthly good”

Similarly, we need to have sufficient social development to be credible and acceptable to others in order that we might build the relationship that enables us to share the love of God.

Each of these are important facets, to paraphrase the object of the Boys’ Brigade, which enable us to “all that tends towards true Christian [adulthood]”, they need to be held in balance – with no specific element being more important than the others.

To change Youth Organisation, I worked many years for the YMCA whose original red triangular logo represented the development of body, mind and spirit. The reason it stands on its tip, like a ‘Give Way’ sign (and there’s a whole other sermon in that thought alone), is that it is supposed to be that unless all three are in balance the whole thing will fall over.

So, whatever age we are, we need to be seeking to develop as Jesus’ developed. To be willing to learn from Jesus’ – including a willingness to listen to the innocent wisdom of our children – which includes a ‘child-like’ but not ‘childish’ reliance on God, and look for the opportunities to change the world.

God surprises us with heaven, coming here on Christmas day – but it doesn’t stop there...

AMEN