

Sunday 31 December 2006: First Sunday of Christmas

A time to search and a time to grow

Colossians 3: 12-17; Luke 2: 41 –end

Human beings, its been said, are the only species not to be tipped out of the nest the minute we get our wings as it were. Indeed, some humans find their growth stunted by being kept in the nest for too long. Until they fledge, birds cannot take care of themselves but once they have wings they're free. Some animals take a bit longer. A kitten, born with its eyes closed, cannot fend for itself but once they open and it can cope with solid food it's on its own. And the turtle simply lays its eggs on the beach, covers them with warm sand and leaves nature to do the rest. When the little 3" creatures hatch out they make their way to the water by instinct, waiting for a wave to lift them up and carry them out, onto the ocean, alone .

That strength and courage and fortitude, whether or not it's consciously felt, somehow makes we human beings seem very weak by comparison. Here we are, usually assuming ourselves to be the most intelligent species on earth and yet totally dependent on others for our existence for a long time. And that dependence may not end with childhood but may recur at other points in our lives, through accident or illness or old age.

But, it was only 6 days ago that we celebrated the coming of God among us in the birth of Christ in the stable – the crib is still here in front of us with the helpless and vulnerable Christ child – as helpless and vulnerable as any baby, and already the readings are rushing us on to a point where Jesus is 12 years old and quite clearly with a mind independent of his parents. From birth to the teenage years in a matter of days. In that accelerated picture – rather like time-lapse photography of, say, a flower, changing from a bud to fully opened glory in front of our eyes in just a few seconds – is there a significance for us that we should be picking up on? The compilers of the lectionary would seem to think so because we're given this story out of order, even before the wise men have arrived at the stable next weekend at Epiphany.

Both the lectionary and the author of Luke rush ahead but they're not the only ones to focus on rapid growth – Jesus' parents, and Mary in particular, are somewhat taken aback by the events of the gospel story. There's nothing to indicate that this annual Passover pilgrimage began in anything other than a perfectly ordinary way ' now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover' we read 'and when Jesus was 12 years old they went up as usual for the festival'.

'Every year' and ' as usual' – words that may remind us of the value of repeated rituals in our lives – we might smile or perhaps groan if someone demurs at change saying ' but we've always done it that way' – or we may find it a bit dull if things happen always 'as usual' – but perhaps this is saying something about the need for some patterns in our life – for a certain degree of order and dependency to give shape to our existence.

But that order, that pattern of things being 'as usual' is shattered when Jesus fails to conform. As the day draws to a close Mary and Joseph discover that he's not with the other children – a heart-stopping moment for any parent and so they hurriedly re-trace their steps to go in search of him.

Mary and Joseph made an assumption that he was with them. Even though they hadn't actually seen him they had assumed, quite happily, that he was with the group and would appear if called. And we may also make assumptions, not about the child Jesus perhaps but, taking another leap in time, about Jesus as Lord. We may assume that he is with us, that we can take his presence for granted somewhere in the comings and goings of our busy lives. We may have work to do, families to support, people to care for, friends to keep up with, responsibilities to shoulder – Jesus will be there when we look for him. And in a way, of course, he is. But if we turn to Christ only when we need him – in times of crisis or desperation or emergency – then it's possible that we may find, in the midst of all that busyness in our lives – achieving what, exactly, we might sometimes wonder – that we have lost touch with him. He's still there but our side of the relationship has withered and we need to re-ignite it by beginning a search, as Mary and Joseph did that day in Jerusalem. Our search may take any number of forms and the key to it may be simple or unexpected. It may be in the patterns and rituals of life – our daily lives or the life of the church – or it may be in the challenge and perhaps fear of the new or different.

Mary and Joseph went in search and, at that moment, they must have faced change, the change of growth, for Jesus, without their even noticing it, had grown up and acquired new wisdom.

Searching and growth. The secular calendar tells us that tonight is New Years' Eve and tomorrow, 2007 will begin. Although some churches do have watch night services at the turn of the year it's not really a liturgical occasion and the events in the Square here preclude us from having one even if we wanted to. But I'm not sure that we would want to anyway for the church has recently marked its own New Year on Advent Sunday.

Today's epistle is also about searching and growth – particularly growth. Not the rapid growth of Jesus' maturity perhaps but the slower growth of our own spirituality. 'Off with the old, on with the new' declared someone on considering Paul's list of 'ethical habits' – clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.' Bear with one another and, above all, clothe yourselves with love' Paul writes. At first sight that doesn't seem to have a lot of the 'challenge' of Jesus about it. It could seem to be rather on the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' side an image that, on the whole, we've come to believe to be a rather mistaken reading of Christ's nature.

But just before that list of qualities Paul encourages us to adopt comes his other list that we didn't hear this morning in which he writes 'Put to death whatever in you is earthly, fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed.'

We might think that the list we listened to – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience - sounds a little wimpish, a bit door-mat like but, given the choice say, of living in one of two towns – one of whose inhabitants practice the first list of qualities and one the second which would you really choose? To choose the second town is certainly not a soft option though the world may sometimes think it is. Today's list isn't a cop-out for the weak-willed or the wimpish. How hard it can be to try seriously to forgive. How hard it can be to be compassionate or to be patient in trying circumstances. How hard it can be to allow peace to be the reality around which we order our lives. To search and to grow in this way is surely the way towards a deeper humanity, not away from it. All that will have its effect far beyond the visible confines of our own lives.

And so, having come through the time of Advent – of waiting and preparation – and watched at the Incarnation we pray that the coming year may be a time to search and a time to grow.