



A Message from Mark!

Growing Pains

27 December 2009 - Christmas 1

Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

Not so! That is heresy my friends! Jesus was a true member of our race. *“He learnt obedience in the school of suffering and so became the source of eternal salvation.”* Here is one of the ironies of my life as a minister of the Gospel: It’s very hard to get **non-Christians** to confront the fact that Jesus was Divine, yet it’s difficult to convince **Christians** that he was truly human.

One of the attractions of imaginative new books about Jesus, by people like Bishop John Spong (and for an earlier generation the books by Lloyd Douglas) is that they underline the common humanity of Jesus. They’re read mainly by church goers who have been in danger of losing the down-to-earth reality of the incarnation. They warm our hearts by depicting a Christ who was one of us; really one of us. In him the human and the divine become beautifully and awesomely aligned.

TRUST THIS MYSTERY

This is the Mystery my friends! Hold on to the Mystery. Or better still, let the Mystery hold on to you. Throughout all the year to come, with the special festivals of Epiphany, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost which we celebrate:

- for goodness sake don’t let go of the hand of the human Jesus.
- only in the human hand do we find the Divine hand,
- and only in the Divine hand do we find our own destiny.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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And Jesus grew in both height and wisdom, held in high regard by God and people. Luke 2:52

Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience in the school of suffering, and being made complete, he became the source of eternal liberation to all who obey him. Hebrews 5: 8-9

How did Jesus, whom we call the Christ, come to be the uniquely good person that he was? So compassionate yet so resolute, so wise yet so simple, so loving yet so tenacious when toughness was needed, so holy yet so approachable? How was it that the son of Mary stands at the pinnacle of all that is best in humanity?

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Much of popularist Christian attitudes assume:

- that Jesus in the manger was already perfectly and omnisciently Divine
- that from his conception he was *‘programmed’* to live the holy life without flaw

Such folk assume that his heavenly origin and destiny meant that he was incapable of being anything else but the perfect person.

We see this in so many paintings of crib scenes, where the baby Christ pronounces blessings on his worshippers, every inch like a infant Pope, magnifico!

You hear it also in prayers and carols: *“The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.”* *“And through all his wondrous childhood, he would honour and obey.”* In such piety you’ll find it very difficult to discover anything which suggests he ever slopped his food, had a really stinking nappy, or as he grew into boyhood, that he dirtied or tore his clothing and skun his knees like every active child does.

What’s more, as his life develops, do we ever allow him to have doubts, or argue with his Dad, or experience peer rivalry for food and drink (you know how it goes: *“her piece of cake is bigger than mine”*) or be tempted to lie, manipulate the facts, to fart, to feel anger, or experience sexual longings? (especially that last one!)

Some writings, both ancient and modern, make Jesus an obnoxious child prodigy, knowing all things and able to do all things. Something like a spiritual version of little Wolfie Mozart, dazzling his contemporaries with his omniscience!

In the Gospel for today, we read again the story of Jesus, on the threshold of teenage years, going with his family to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But when the celebrations were over, Jesus went missing. His parents finally found him in the courtyard of the temple, questioning the rabbis and giving his own opinions.

Unfortunately this passage is often interpreted as a case of the perfect young Jesus, using his infallible, complete knowledge to confound the wisest men of Israel. In some paintings on this subject, he’s like an obnoxious young upstart, lecturing the elders about their errors.

This distortion is even worse in some of the apocryphal literature from the second and third centuries. There you’ll encounter a self-righteous know-all, the terror of those rabbis who were given the task of teaching Jesus. Some didn’t survive their attempts to correct him. (Praise God that these piebald writings didn’t make it into the New Testament.)

THE PAIN OF GROWING

As I see it, Jesus had growing pains like the rest of us. I take heart from the conclusion to today’s Gospel reading. *‘And Jesus increased in*

wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour. (Lk 2:52)

With a great sigh of relief, I get a picture of Jesus growing in body and mind. I see a very special, indeed unique, young man on the way to becoming that magnificent person whose character, deeds and words, have enthralled the succeeding centuries.

I also want to place beside Luke’s comment about Jesus growing in body and mind, some comments from the letter to the Hebrews. Now, I confess that Hebrews is not one of my favourite books in the New Testament’ yet it contains some absolute gems, such as this one from Chapter 5: vs 8 and 9;

“Son though he was, Jesus learned obedience in the school of suffering, and being made complete, he became the source of eternal liberation to all who obey him.”

This informs me that Jesus, like the rest of us, came to fully be what he was through the normal process of life, with all its ups and downs. In his life he had to grow, to learn, and to mature and some of the maturity came from suffering.

The thirty or so years between his birth and active ministry were not a *‘running on the one spot’* by a perfect, spiritual athlete, waiting for the right date to perform.

No way! It was an essential part of the incarnation; the developing of the Son of God, the growing of Divine Love, enfleshed in humanity, for our salvation.

THE ESSENTIAL HUMANITY OF JESUS

I think we in the church live in constant danger of losing the essential humanity of Jesus, and thereby lose the profound mystery of the incarnation of God, and the wondrous brotherliness of our Christ.

I’ve heard people comment when confronted with some of the tough challenges and complexities of life: *“But of course Jesus had the advantage over us; he was God’s Son.”*