

Luke 2:41-52

Over the next two weeks we're going to look at children and young people. Quite fitting really as this year is the Year of Young People as named by the Scottish Government and embraced by the Church of Scotland. Our congregation pledged to explore ways to engage with under 25s and increase participation of young people in the life of the church.

For far too long we have silenced the voice of young people right across the board. In the church and in the society at large, even though we seem to have a cult of youth and youthfulness, we still place greater importance on the opinion of adults than that of young people. Today's passage counteracts that by emphasising the fact that God affirms young people. Jesus was not only allowed to take part in the discussions, to ask questions and listen in to the debate of the seasoned temple leaders but consistently listened to with great concentration. We learn that his comments and answers amazed the teachers around him. All this took three days. He wasn't just given a mere 5 minutes but instead he was part of the theological debate for 3 days. What a marvellous example of nurturing the young!

Now let's look at Mary. Mary assumes Jesus is with the big family group travelling together. She had no reason not to as people travelled in big groups and all of them were on their way back home. She had every reason to expect her son to be part of that group.

However at the end of the day, when families got together for meals, she cannot find Jesus. She searches frantically but eventually has to admit to herself that he's not there and they will therefore need to turn back and search for him in Jerusalem. This was not an easy decision to take as travelling without the protection of a larger group of people was dangerous. This also meant she had to publically admit that her son had disobeyed her.

After three days Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the Temple. Where did they look before they found him there? Obviously it wasn't the first place they thought of. In any case that's the place where they do find him. Surprisingly it is Mary who scolds him – it would normally be the father who would discipline the child.

Jesus doesn't give in though. He responds to her question (Son, why have you treated us like this?) with questions of his own (Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?).

The age of 12 was a customary age when boys transitioned from being boys under the wings of their mothers to becoming young men active in the public sphere of men. This incident marks that transition in a clear way. That's also the beginning of a life-long pattern of questioning his interlocutors and making them rethink their stance and views.

In addition the whole story spells out another fact about Jesus that was significant for the Jewish readers of the Gospel of Luke. They knew that Deuteronomy 16:5-6 instructed the

people in this way: ‘You must not sacrifice the Passover in any town the Lord your God gives you ⁶ except in the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name.’ That dwelling was the Temple in Jerusalem by the time Jesus was born. When Jews read this passage they picked up that Jesus grew up in a faithful Jewish household, immersed in the Jewish traditions. They knew he breathed Judaism, its Scriptures and traditions from birth and so what he taught came from that deep well of faithfulness and reinterpretation of the same tradition they themselves cherished and lived by.

After this event two things happen. On one hand Jesus reverts to being an obedient child to his parents. On the other hand Mary is said to have treasured all these things in her heart. After the initial upset and frustration, she accepts her son’s passion and individuality and wants to nurture that. She knows there is more to raising a child than feeding, clothing, protecting from sunburn and chicken pox and tending the scrapes on his knee. She wants him to become his own person and develop his natural skills and talents. That’s what she loves about him and that’s what she’s proud of – even though it caused havoc in her family life and will do so even more as Jesus grows up. Because of this nurture, love and unconditional support ‘Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.’

Spill the Beans make us consider important questions through the following reflection: ‘What do you see when you look at the young person who sits just in front of you in church, the one dressed all in black? Or the one who walks past your window every day with the rainbow coloured hair? Or the one in the local shop, who is so tall and still has some growing to do? What do you see?’

Do you see a bundle of hormones and angst that brings energy and awkwardness? Do you see creativity and the refusal to be labelled? Do you see wisdom and sensitivity that cares for the planet and its inhabitants? Do you see the gift that each one brings – or only the potential that they may one day grow into? What do you see?

Do you see the one created in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made, beloved of God through every age and stage of life, uniquely placed to enhance the lives of others, a co-creator with God in this place and in this time? One who may have much to learn but who also has much to teach others. Packaged in youth—the spark of the Divine.’¹

Today’s story shows that in God there is room for everyone – for everyone’s dreams, visions, opinions and input. And that regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, past track record or health issues. That’s how inclusive God is – maybe because he has created us in such wonderful diversity.

Another truth of this passage is that all of us are learners on a journey. All of us have much to learn but also much to give. None of us have it all together, know it all and have no need of further learning. If we think that, we are deceiving ourselves. If seasoned theologians learned from a 12-year-old, there is no shame in admitting that we have

¹ Spill the Beans, issue 28, p. 15.

learned something new. Maybe that's the greatest wisdom in fact – to admit that we are teachable and can and want to learn every day.

Last but not least I'd like to finish with an insightful quote from Peter Woods' 'The Listening Hermit' blog: 'It was the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran, in *The Prophet*, who first alerted me to the fact that, "*Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*"

There is a parable for me in the way that Mary and Joseph set off back home and travel a whole day with the assumption that Jesus is tagging along.

I feel their discovery of his absence viscerally, for as a parent I know how it is to wake up to the fact that my children are under no obligation to follow the path that I have chosen for myself. I remember the awakening to how I simply assumed that they, and every other rational being on the planet should emulate my path, my values and my way of looking at the world. (...)

They may not need to follow us back to Nazareth. It doesn't mean they are lost. They are simply finding their own destined home, often closer to God's heart than we are!² Amen.

² <https://thelisteninghermit.com/tag/luke-241-52/>.