Letting the child grow up
A sermon by Revd Colin Midlane

Readings: Colossians 3.12-17; Luke 2.41-end

In Church we spent Advent waiting for Christmas.
Last Tuesday, Christmas Day, we welcomed Christ, the new-born babe. So I wish you “Happy Christmas” because there are at least 12 days of Christmas to celebrate. This may be my only chance to tell you my favourite Nativity Play story, told to me by a Methodist minister, so it must be true! At the school nativity play, a little boy, one of the shepherds, came up to the manger, looked into it and declared, quite unscripted, “He looks just like his father!” That little boy came remarkably close to summing up something of the mystery of the Incarnation (Jesus is just like his father). And Incarnation is something I want to explore a little this morning.

Today the Lectionary moves us on, perhaps a bit out of sequence, and we’ve heard that fascinating story of the boy Jesus in the Temple, the baby has grown up.

Perhaps I’m fond of this story because it is the only one in the four gospels about Jesus the boy, interrupting the long number of years between the accounts of his birth and the start of his public ministry. I would dearly love to know more about the unrecorded years. (I can imagine the Steven Spielberg production: “Jesus, the early years” or “Jesus, the hidden years.”)

I have my own questions:
- Was Jesus ever a “stroppy teenager” to Mary and Joseph? In today’s reading, he certainly shows independence of mind and spirit. (apologies to any teenagers present)
- What ambitions might Mary and Joseph have had for their son?
- What did the young Jesus expect his future life to hold?
- Was Jesus under pressure from his peer group to be “one of the lads” and get into trouble?
- How did he cope with the journey from boyhood to adulthood and the discovery of his own sexuality?

I think those questions are quite legitimate: if we believe in “The Incarnation” (that of Jesus), we believe in God enfleshed, God become Man, become Human. It’s a truly shocking doctrine.

In his lecture here a few weeks ago, John Bell reminded us how some hymns may take us far from the truth. He cited “Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,” which we sing later, as quite unrealistic, an inhuman baby,

Other hymns or carols get it right:
“And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.”

I love the picture on a Christmas card, produced by the Sisters at Freeland Convent: Mary hanging up the nappies on a washing line! Here is a baby like any other: growing and hungry, therefore, demanding and crying. The sleepless nights, being a tiny part of the joys and pains that parents accept? (So I’m told!)
I described the Incarnation as a doctrine that is truly shocking; indeed for many it may seem a nonsense. The psychologist Carol Jung said: “It is a wonder the human frame did not shatter when one thinks that God dwelt in a body.”

A poet called Luci Shaw writes of the Incarnation,” rescuing us into reality...

...If we celebrate,
Let it be that he
Has invaded our lives with purpose.”

There’s a further shock-value to the doctrine of the Incarnation, and one that can have an enormous consequence for us all. Christmas could be called “The Festival of the Flesh” – we celebrate God enfleshed, Jesus Christ alongside every human being, for we all share in being ‘enfleshed.’ Every Christmas I turn again to words of a sermon by Archbishop Oscar Romero. He said to his congregation:

“The flesh is we who are present here – infants just beginning to live, the vigorous adolescent, the old person nearing the end….The flesh is the actual human situation: human beings in sin, human beings in painful situations,. The people of a nation that seems to have got into a blind alley. The flesh is all of us who live incarnate.

The flesh, this frail flesh that has beginning and end, that sickens and dies, that becomes miserable or happy – that is what the Word became. The Word became flesh.”

So Jesus is God with us, sharing total solidarity with us in this world of the flesh. Through the Incarnation the original dignity of each and every person is reaffirmed.

“Incarnation irrevocably reveals that God has carefully created and tenderly blessed all people with dignity and worthiness.” (Daniel O’Leary)

That is shocking indeed, for now we are confronted with the sanctity of all life – our own and each person we meet.

Finally this morning’s Gospel reminds us that the infant Jesus had to grow up – and that we have to let him grow up, not keep him carefully tucked away in that manger, trapped by the tinsel and keeping him helpless so that he can be no threat (or real blessing) to this world: “Let him invade our lives with purpose,” remember? There is “Danger in the manger!” as the movie says, and the poem.

He is to become ‘Risen Master, death defying’ as another hymn this morning puts it. We can be encouraged by the fact that Jesus had to grow up and to make his own spiritual journey. That’s part of Incarnation too. What help would Jesus be to us if he were pre-programmed like some robot, knowing everything that could be known about the One we call God, the One he called Father?

He shared in question and answer in the Temple. He had to learn to trust. He had to discover his own vocation, God the Father’s will for him. So he was tested in the wilderness, and later struggled in Gethsemane.

“The boy grew in wisdom and stature.” Over the years he waited upon God; he prayed; his relationship to the Father become one of intense intimacy. Let the child grow up! Let each of us grow up and mature in our faith over the years, growing in trust of God.

The Incarnation, the gift of the Christ Child, is God’s blessing to us all. We celebrate it with great joy and, if we are willing, we are also challenged by it.

1 From the “Lion Book of Christian Verse”
2 Poem, ‘I saw a stable’ by Mary Coleridge
As the poet Howard Thurman puts it, Christmas is just the beginning:
“When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the list,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To make peace among the people
To make music in the heart.”³ Amen.

³ Quoted in Ann Lewin's 'Come Emmanuel' (Canterbury Press, 2012)