

The pains of adolescence

Luke 2:41-end

The story we read in today's Gospel is one which has been listened to with various attitudes over the years, I am sure. Commentators are sure to make the point that it reflects Jesus growing awareness of his relationship with God, and the beginnings of his call to his ministry in later years. And that has been used by preachers and readers of the story to soften what in fact is a fairly shocking story, a story even more shocking to some generations than to our own. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Joseph and Mary looking for Jesus in Jerusalem for three days - this twelve-year old lost in a teeming city full of pilgrims for the Passover, but also full of criminals, making use of the business of the place, full of urban terrorists, out for opportunities to get at the Roman occupiers of the land. It would terrify a modern parents of a twelve year old - and I am not sure it would have been very different then. What had the boy been doing, where had he slept, where did he eat? We have to work hard at justifying Jesus actions - and maybe in the end of the day we cannot. Was it a loving action to cause his parents such worry? You wrestle with the answer for yourselves.

I am not sure that what I am saying now has any historical validity, but it does seem to me to shed some light on some of the problems today's parents face - and which perhaps have always been faced by parents of adolescents, and by society as a whole. If this was genuinely part of what was going on in this story, so be it. The area I am particularly thinking of is the area of mixed-messages. Parents have this enormous problem of letting go and young people have this tremendous fight to assert their independence. Both are vital activities if both parents and children are going to survive with any degree of personal integrity and wholeness. You can probably think as easily as I can of people you have known who have clung to their children in a totally inappropriate way for far too long. I can think of a relation of mine who looked after a mother who 'enjoyed' her bad health throughout her life. Her only child looked after until she died in her eighties, and then, by then well into middle-age, he immediately married. His life had been dominated by a woman who wouldn't let go. And there are thousands in that position. We have all known those who have had to go to extreme lengths to separate themselves from their parents, because the parents have refused to let them go. Instead of a gentle parting of the ways, there has been a great explosive reactions.

I remember someone telling me about how his son had fulfilled all his hopes - achieving everything that his father wanted. And when the final crowning glory of his particular interest was achieved, he said to his father - 'Now, I've done it for you, get off my back'. The man in question had never realised until then how much he was trying to live his life through his son in that way. But it had been true.

Back to this idea then of mixed messages. Parents give children the message that they are now grown-up in some way or other, and then immediately behave as if they had never said it. They give independence and retract it almost in a sentence. And I find a lot of young people expressing some bewilderment (at best) and anger (at worst) at all this. They are trying to establish where they are, and can't get a clear message in reply. That is easily explained - the parents don't know either! But that doesn't make it any easier. So Jesus in this story had reached formal adult status - i.e. he had had his Bar-Mitzvah - he was a Son of the Law - able to be a member of a synagogue, responsible to God for his life. It was a very important time - ~ as it still is for a Jewish boy. But nonetheless he was only twelve - and there is a conflict between saying you are fully

responsible to God for your life and actions, and then expecting him to be totally dependent and obedient. Jesus, like any other Jewish adolescent, had to discover what obeying the commandment to honour father and mother meant as an adult. It was obvious enough what it meant as a child - but its validity didn't end just because he was now twelve. And no doubt he had to struggle with that conflict just like any other boy.

We must beware of tut-tutting at the system which produced this conflict, because we are not so very different. I find it quite intolerable that our own church gives these mixed messages. We have happily confirmed children very young – ten, eleven, twelve, and sometimes younger, in an age where – albeit incorrectly, people have thought of confirmation as becoming an adult member of the Christian community. But then we have denied them any right to be an active member of the community by denying them the right to vote for the PCC or indeed to be a member of it. You can't have it both ways - or not without annoying the intelligent adolescent. Am I an adult member or am I not? On a Christian plane, it is precisely paralleling the question that is being thrust at them from all sides. Who am I? How independent am I? How responsible am I to be? There is a great deal of truth in the saying that if you treat someone as a child, they will behave as a child.

Joseph and Mary did not understand Jesus, the story says. He had grown up in a way they hadn't comprehended. That is so true to life. Most parents at some point are shocked, maybe in a nice way, but nonetheless shocked, by discovering how adult and independent their offspring has become. For the more balanced parent, the shock is followed by pride, where the discovery is positive. This is, after all, what nurture is about - helping a child to be able to let go, to develop opinions and so on. It would sound from the reading that Mary had that kind of reaction - we don't know about Joseph. Sometimes there is a tremendous discontinuity between the way a young person behaves with friends and at school, and the way they behave at home. And this may have a lot to do with how this process of granting them their right to a new status is going on. Most adolescents are crying out to be listened to. And sadly, most of us have within us the defence mechanism which puts them down. And often it is easy to do. But in doing so, we are crushing their attempts to flex wings ready for leaving the nest. And adolescent certainties often disturb our personal uncertainties - their blacks and whites stand out against our shades of grey. But they are desperately asking for us to take them seriously - because that is also part of enabling them to develop. I was talking to someone about an offspring who had recently passed the driving test. The young person was an efficient and careful driver – but, as father said - still lacks road experience. The only way to get it is to be on the road. And if the newly fledged driver is kept in the passenger seat because the experience isn't there, it never will be there.

Pray for parents and children who, like Jesus and his parents, have these growing pains to cope with. It is never easy, as we all know from our own experience. The society we live in doesn't help - the church is not alone in giving mixed messages. Some of our laws about when young people can do this or that are inconsistent. Rules are equally bad - because they take no account of the individual. Parents and children can take account of the individual in so many ways - but doing so is fraught with pitfalls. I take some comfort from this lesson that it wasn't easy for Jesus and his parents either. In the end, a compromise is reached, and relationships are healed. Maybe, as in so many things, we can hold that as an ideal, even if in this particular instance, we can't be sure the ideal was itself perfect.