

I Sam 2:18-20, 26
Col 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

Dec. 27, 2009
Bakersfield, CA

"Growing in Wisdom and Grace"

There's an old adage that I find more true all the time: too soon old, too late wise.

Of Jesus' boyhood, this incident is the only one recorded in the Gospels. In the Temple, Jesus is shown listening, answering questions, asking questions. He knows the Torah and its interpretations. When his parents come to find him, his answer to their concern is "I must be about my Father's business." And it seems Mary and Joseph don't understand. A common affliction of parents. Perhaps they have not grasped his divine calling? Perhaps they cannot see the divine in their ordinary boy? Again, common afflictions of parents.

Jesus was found in the outer court of the Temple - not the center of the *cultus* where sacrifices were made- but in the place of learning and instruction, the place associated with the usual school practice. It says that he then went home with his family and grew in wisdom and grace. The family, it seems, is the place where learning and growing in relationship with God is carried on. As Scripture says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." (Phil. 1:6). That's not only true for you, but also for all the children here.

Each of us is an example to the children of who and what a Christian person is. Train a child in the way he should go, and walk there yourself. When your children see you take time each day to be with God, through prayer and Bible reading; when they come to church and are treated by their elders with love and respect, then they will grow to know the truth of the lessons they receive in church and Sunday School. When we focus on Christ, look beyond our own lives, then we can see our children as they could be. Abraham Lincoln once wrote, "A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on him."

This continues to be true . . . Paul's five virtues of compassion, which he listed in his letter to the Colossians: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience are still foundations of good family and good character.

Okay, I've strayed a bit from the biblical text here... the main point of this story is not how to raise children. Rather, the main point is this: who is Jesus' father? Mary says, "Your father and I have been worried" and this paves the way for identifying Jesus' heavenly father. He says he must be about his Father's business meaning: the Temple and study of Scripture, and all of life, even everyday life with his mother and father.

Humans are so alienated from God that they will think of anything rather than the real and active presence of God in their lives. Yet where gentle souls receive him still, he will enter in. Sometimes God's presence appears in prayer and worship, sometimes in work or play; but maybe just as often in a movie, or concert, or sporting event. Jesus' life shows God's presence but he does not underline it with miracles. In fact, he continued for some 30 years in a very ordinary environment (Nazareth) yet, it is written, he grew in wisdom and grace. And how are you growing in the Lord, in wisdom and grace? Or are you at the same place you were one year ago, five years, ten years? Are you growing bigger, so that you have a greater capacity for compassion, for kindness, humility, patience, and love?

He grows as any other boy - quite ordinary -- except, from an early age he seemed to know his calling. So this story shows him as both ordinary and unique, in other words both human and divine. He is not a meteor dropping out of the sky; still there is something of the divine about him.

But then this is the truth we know: God is found in the everydayness of life. Not that all everydayness and ordinariness is divine - that is banality. But the divine does show forth in ordinary life. And that means God is found in our present. It seems we often focus on the future (hurry to get our tasks done . . .) or on the past (nostalgia for the old ways or old circumstances), and thereby miss Him in the present. This is still Christmas, despite what the stores think. It continues to be the time to celebrate the Incarnation, God with us. Let's not be too quick to take down the decorations, and with them our focus on this momentous event of God coming among us.

The mystery of Christ in our lives, if we let it be so, is the power of the divine/human partnership - God and us working together. We always look for something spectacular instead of Christ in us, among us, around us, in spite of us. God works in ordinary lives with ordinary people like you and me. I am not saying that all things ordinary are necessarily holy. Yet the holy will be found in ordinary places and ways, and in you. And then, the ordinary can display God's extraordinary presence.

Like that favorite Christmas carol sings, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls receive him, still our Lord Christ enters in."

God continues to call us, each one of us, to join Jesus, to be about our Father's business, everyday and in every way. Merry Christmas to all!