

PACKING AWAY CHRISTMAS?
LUKE 2:41-52

At some point during the next week, we will pack away Christmas for another year. Don't get me wrong; I love it all – to have the house decorated with the tree and the decorations and the cards on the wall and the house always looks really bare when we take all these things down and pack them away or recycle the tree! On the other hand, people would look at us oddly, if we still had the Christmas decoration on the front door in June! So Christmas gets packed away for another year along with all the other boxes in the attic. For some people, it also means that Jesus gets packed away for another year: there are still some for whom their only contact with Jesus is the Christmas story; they only know of Jesus as a baby in the manger at Bethlehem and so their understanding of the Christian story is only about the baby and maybe that's way they want it; it doesn't affect their lives and they don't see how that baby can be at all relevant to the real life they live for the rest of the year; Jesus is packed away with the Christmas decorations and is forgotten about for another 12 months. The challenge for us is to make sure that Jesus is part of life for the whole year and to show the world that Jesus is real and relevant for all of life and not just for Christmas.

Luke tells us a story from Jesus' growing up. This is the only story in the gospels that tells us anything about the young Jesus. It is a fascinating little story that tells us something about Jesus' growing sense of who He is and also gives us something of Jesus as a model for us as Christians. We'll unpick these 2 themes a little.

Jesus has been part of a group of people travelling to Jerusalem for a feast. There were three great feasts in the Jewish calendar and people travelled to Jerusalem for all of them. The Passover was one of these feasts, a time that would have so much significance for Jesus at the end of His ministry – it was at Passover time that He died in the same city, focussed on the same temple! The group of people travelled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover and Jesus was amongst them. He was a twelve-year old boy and at 13 He would reach the age of responsibility so this may have been preparing Him for that time. On other hand, He may have gone every year; we just don't know. They had been in the city for the Passover and are now heading home; it was a large group and both Mary and Joseph obviously assumed Jesus was with the other! Everything is fine till the end of the first day's travel; there is no sign of Jesus; so in a growing state of panic they look for Him and finally retrace their steps; did they wait till daybreak or did they travel through the night? They find Him, eventually, in the Temple and Mary lets out all of her understandable anxiety: "*Son, why...*" (Luke 2:48) I was in ASDA before Christmas and as I was leaving, there was a mother calling out for her son and her voice was growing more and more anxious, louder and louder, there was more and more of a cry in her voice, looking for her son; I hope she found him! It must have been that kind of feeling for Mary, though the times were different and arguably safer.

Jesus has this growing sense of who He is and we see that in His fairly famous reply to His parents' concern. These are the first recorded words of the Messiah and they show us something of His growing sense of a relationship with God. "*Why were...*" (Luke 2:49) They found Him in the temple – "my Father's house", the house of God! Where did this growing sense come from? We don't really know, but these words show us that Jesus has this sense of a special relationship with God as Father. This is something that would mark Jesus out as unique: time and time again in the gospels we catch this sense of a

unique relationship between Jesus and His Father, that somehow His relationship with God was something that no-one else had enjoyed or could enjoy, a Oneness with the Father that was His and His alone. He draws us into that relationship in a little way by teaching us to pray “Our Father”, but we come no way near this special relationship. There are people who are comfortable with Jesus as a great moral teacher, who still has something to teach us about our society and its morality, but are completely uncomfortable with any talk of Jesus as God. But if you take out any notion of Jesus as God from the New Testament picture you lose the story almost completely. There is nothing more important for the Christian faith than a deep and sure sense of Jesus: the Son of God, Saviour, Lord – “the unshakable centre of the Christian creed and confession” – it always has been, and it always will be!

There is also something here about Jesus as a model for us as disciples. Let’s start at the end: “*Jesus grew...*” (Luke 2:52) What does that mean? It means a whole lot of things: it means that He was growing up as a normal young man, physically developing; it means that He was developing an understanding of Himself and how to do the will of God in His life, a spiritual understanding of faith and life, a growing commitment to God and to the world of which He was a part. In this, He has to be a model for us. You might say, “He was Jesus and He was a 12-year old boy; how can He be a model for me?” Capture the notion of “growing” – we see Jesus with a growing understanding, a growing sense of Himself, a growing obedience and commitment. Here is the role model! In what way is your faith different today from 10 years ago? Is it stronger, weaker, or the same? In what way is your understanding of the Christian faith different from 10 years ago? Is it deeper, more shallow, or the same? Ideally, the answer to both should be “stronger”, that faith is a growing part of our lives, a faith that is stronger and deeper, an understanding is deeper. Yet many adults have a faith that was formed in Sunday School and hasn’t changed much in the years since then. Do we have a growing faith, a deepening faith? Are we growing in wisdom, growing in our commitment to Jesus? Are we wiser Christians, more obedient disciples?

How do we do that growing? “*After three...*” (Luke 2:46f) Did Jesus not have all the answers? It would appear that He didn’t come as the fully formed Messiah! What is He doing? He’s asking questions; He’s listening to the answers; He’s offering opinions and answers that can be shaped and corrected by the teachers in the temple. Here is the “willing-to-learn” Jesus! He is willing to ask and to listen and to learn; this is the clue to His growing wisdom; the two are totally connected. How do we grow our faith? How do we sustain our faith? First of all, be ready to listen; secondly, be willing to ask questions; thirdly, be willing to be corrected. Have you ever been in the situation where you’ve been asked a question and you’ve given the answer only to have the person go off and ask other people the same question and get the same answer from others; they were ready to accept others’ answer, but not yours? How did that make you feel? Equally, we’ve all met people who have all the answers, or at least think they have all the answers to all the questions. Here is Jesus willing to listen to the teachers, willing to learn; and age is irrelevant. This is all about attitude, being humble enough to listen and to learn. Our teacher is the Bible. “We know better than the Bible” was said; actually we don’t! There is a wealth of wisdom and insight, of spiritual understanding for us and for our world; the sooner we engage with the Bible, listen to it, ask questions of it, the stronger and deeper will be our faith. The disciple listens, is ready to ask questions, wants to learn, grow and develop.

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A theology professor was leading a seminar one day and one of his students was confused by something the professor said and maybe he was trying to be clever and pin the professor down with a theological label. So he said “tell me, Professor, where do you stand on the bible?” meaning “what is your opinion of it and your attitude to it?” The professor replied “I do not stand on it; I sit under it!” This was a wise answer, rather than a clever one! Without spiritual understanding of life and faith, the world is a very confusing place; without wisdom and insight, things get very clouded. Sitting under the Bible won't give you pat answers to all the questions and dilemmas, of life and faith but it will grow your faith, it will deepen your understanding. Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature” – let's be like Jesus; Jesus was “listening...” – let's be like Jesus. Look for a growing faith, a growing understanding, a growing church – centred on Jesus, Saviour and Lord.