

LUKE 2:41-52  
AN IN-BETWEEN TIME

This is always an in-between week for me. We've had Christmas and all the effort and energy that has gone into Christmas both as a family time and as a church time; there are extra services and events and there are lots of people around and I'm not sure who will be here and how they will react to the message that we tell and the way in which we tell it. All of that is past and the advent candles are left unlit and the posters advertising Christmas events are down and we've done Christmas for 2018. Next week is New Year, 2019, and there's another celebration and some more things to do, but that's for next week; we're not there yet. So here we are, in-between times and what do we say to in-between times?

We've told some good news stories from 2018: when I set out to make that list I was not sure what would be on it; then it became a longer list than I thought when I started. These are all good news stories from church life and it is good to look back on these stories with thankfulness, with gratitude to God for His faithfulness, patience and involvement in the life of our church, His Spirit inspiring us to do these good things. We look back with glad hearts and say "thank you" to God. But in this in-between time, we also look forward to what comes next: what challenges will face us in 2019? What good news stories will we create next year? Of course, we don't know the answer to that question from here, but our challenge is to be open to the inspiration of the Spirit to do good things in the days to come.

Today's story of Jesus always strikes me as a bit of an "in-between moment" story. It is the only piece in the bible that tells us about Jesus as He grows up. We have left behind the story of the baby in a manger, of angels, shepherds and wise men, of Herod and of this family being refugees in Egypt. Behind this story lies a settled life in Nazareth; Mary, Joseph and Jesus are at home there, with Jesus learning a trade with Joseph, the son of a carpenter, the would-be carpenter! There seems to be a settled spiritual life, the family coming to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, maybe having done so every year of their Nazareth life. But there is also a clear forward look in this story as to what Jesus might yet be; what does the future hold for Him? How will He work out that future? What will He become? How will He discover what He is to become?

*Jesus is at an in-between age.* He is 12! For 12-year olds in our culture that's about going to High School, gaining a little more independence, having to make some choices for themselves, yet not totally independent and still relying on their parents for all sorts of things. It means developing a sense of your own mind and trying to work out what you believe for yourself rather than just take your parents' word for things. Being 12 is the start of being no longer a child, but not yet an adult. That's where Jesus is: an in-between age. In His culture, boys became men at 13; at 13 they went through the ceremonies of manhood; at 13 they could take part in the Passover feast for themselves. He is in this in-between place, not really a child, still not an adult.

Maybe this is what caused confusion in his parents. They left Jerusalem without Him; why? Euan suggested it was careless! Mary would be at the front of their little pilgrim party, with the children and perhaps Joseph assumed that Jesus would be there; He is still a child after all. But Jesus was 12, nearly a man; maybe Mary thought that Jesus would be with Joseph and the men at the back of the group. Whatever the reason, neither of them noticed that He was not there. When they realized that He was not with either of them, frantically they ran back to Jerusalem to find Him as any parent would do, panic in their hearts. "*Son, why...*" (Luke 2:48) He is still young enough for his mum to be worried and still to "mother" Him; what tone of voice would you put onto Mary's words? How would you read them? Is she angry? Worried? Did she even embarrass Him with her concern?

*Jesus is at an in-between stage in His life.* Look at His answer: “*Didn’t you...*” (Luke 2:49) Again, you can read these words in all sorts of tones and depending on the tone, you read them in all sorts of different ways. There was a point in Jesus’ life when Joseph was his father; now Jesus has a sense of a different Father, that He is God’s Son and whether we say He was in His “father’s house” or about His “father’s business” it means the same. He has a sense of God as Father and that His life is somehow tied up with that notion. What He once knew is now changed; He has a growing awareness of something else. At home in the temple, He has wisdom beyond His years; maybe he does not yet fully understand what this means, and there is more yet to discover but there are days coming when the notions of God’s Kingdom and salvation and the cross would fill His mind and He would see His way. He is not there yet, but He is at this in-between place.

Something of that “in-between” is always with us. Christian faith is not a settled thing that you join it once and then need to do nothing else for the rest of your life. There is always a “yet and not-yet” about being a Christian, a sense of being constantly in-between. There are still questions to ask, things we’ve yet to discover, answers to find, faith to grow deeper and stronger; it is always an “in-between” kind of life. This is the notion that lies behind Paul’s writing in Colossians 3: “*Clothe yourselves...*” (Colossians 3:12) We are made new people in Christ; this is who we are; we are children of God, loved by God, special to Him; nothing can take that away or diminish that sense of who we are already. But there is always an idea of more to do; we are to put on these Christ-like qualities like a new set of clothes: “*compassion, ...*” (Colossians 3:12); “*Over all...*” (Colossians 3:14) We are never the finished article; we are always needing to be more and more like Jesus; we are always needing to have these qualities in our character more and more. Every year, every day, there is a challenge for us to be more Christ-like, to love Jesus more, to be more devoted to Him, to be more open to the inspiring of the Spirit. We are an “in-between” people!

Are you going to make any New Year resolutions? I think I’ve given up, except on this one, to be more like Jesus. We are never finished; there is always more to be and do; there is always more compassion to find, more kindness, more humility, more gentleness, more patience, more forgiveness, more love. You’d say that for yourself too, surely? We are “in-between” what we are and what we might yet become. We look back on 2018 as a congregation and give thanks for the good news stories of this year, but we also look forward and pray “how can we create more good news stories for 2019?” Jesus was “in-between”: a child and not yet a man; He was about His Father’s business but maybe not yet sure what that was! God was with Him in these “in-between” spaces; God is with us in our “in-between” spaces; follow Him wherever He leads; He will strengthen and help us everywhere we go.