

First Sunday of Christmas  
December 27, 2009

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*Scriptures: 1Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:121-17; Luke 2:41-52*

## **Whose Child Is This?**

I'm sure most of us have wondered at some time about the life of Jesus the man. It is such an interesting, but also mind boggling proposition: God made human. What does it mean? Though we profess in our faith that Jesus is both fully God and human at the same time, it maybe a difficult idea to grasp. I must confess it is to me. We have such different understandings of what does it mean to be God and does what it means to be human that it becomes a challenge to put the two together. So for example, we may wonder, if Jesus is God, what was his experience being human? The text for this morning may make us reflect on questions like this one. What it was like to be a member of Mary and Joseph's family? Maybe you have wondered what Jesus was like as a child. We would like to know a bit more about his childhood and his growing up in Galilee. And the reason why we wonder is because the Bible tells us next to nothing about his childhood.

The gospels don't tell us much about Jesus' childhood except for the bare facts. He was born and laid in a manger, he was circumcised and named on the eighth day according to the custom of his time, and he was brought to the temple at 40 days as the Old Testament Law required. And perhaps that's all we need to know. We could assume that if there was anything else important for us to know about Jesus' early years Luke and the other gospel writers would have told us. Maybe the reason we haven't been told anything else about Jesus as a child is because he simply grew up like any other boy in Nazareth, playing with the kids in the neighborhood, helping out at home, and maybe learning his father's trade. I bet that this is just a case of an uneventful, normal childhood like the kind most of us have had.

And it is precisely that "normal"—dare I say—boring human life what makes us wonder. We would like to know, what was Jesus like at school? Was he top of his class or did he get average grades? Maybe he wasn't good in math, but had better scores in reading comprehension. Also, I'm sure that kids in the time the Bible was written had competitions among them, you know like who can run faster, and who can throw a stone farther and that kind of thing. Did Jesus win any of them? Did he ever get sick, like a tummy ache from eating too much candy? And here's the really important question: when he became a teenager, did he have pimples?

We don't know any of that, and again it may not be important to know. Beyond being presented in the temple, the only other story about young Jesus that we hear about in the Bible is the one we have read today. On a trip to Jerusalem with his parents he went missing for at least three days. Now, that's a human story that we all can relate to. Regardless that you have children or not, I'm sure that we all can shudder at the prospect of not knowing where your child, or niece, or grandkid is. What parent hasn't felt that pit-of-the-stomach fear when a child is out of your sight and unaccounted for? Even more, what parent hasn't felt those mixed emotions of relief at finding your child but also exasperation when he or she goes saying, "but mom, I wasn't lost; I know where I am!" I wonder what happened to the meek and humble Mary we heard of in last week's gospel

reading. Because the Mary we hear of today actually sounds aggravated as she addresses her child. And who's to blame her. Jesus himself sounds almost, should I say, impertinent and cocky: "Mom, why are you looking for me?" I don't know about you, but in my time that was considered "talking back" and I would have risked a slap in the mouth. Anyway, all that may make us very curious about Jesus the man, and in particular about Jesus the child of Mary and Joseph.

But we then may also have a totally different set of questions. These ones don't have to do with what kind of human life Jesus may have had, but with his divine nature of which we talk in our faith. Because we have not forgotten that the little Jesus that was born in a stable is actually the Son of God. So, how did he know that he was actually God? Or maybe we could ask differently, was there ever a time when he didn't know he was God? One thing we do know from scripture is that Mary and Joseph were devout Jewish people. We have already mentioned that they had Jesus circumcised and presented at the temple as the Law mandated them to do. Today's reading also tells us that they went to Jerusalem every year for the festival of the Passover. Knowing that, it is safe to assume that they also taught Jesus about the holy scriptures of the Jewish tradition. At what point did he learn that he was the Messiah that the prophets talked about? Moreover, when or how did he realize that he would one day suffer and die taking on himself the sin of all people?

So, whose child is this? Is this the son of Mary and Joseph that got lost while traveling or is this the Son of God that was born to sacrifice his life for all? Most parents with young children would probably like to know what it would be like to raise a perfect child. Imagine a child whose twos weren't terrible, who has no temper tantrums, who would never talk back at you, who would not refuse to go to bed or take a shower when told to, and who would never bring home a note from the teacher at school. Wouldn't that be delightful? Ah, maybe... maybe not. I don't think any parent would want to wish painful experiences for their children, but difficulty in their lives is a little like viruses. The way the immune system of children is normally developed is by getting exposed to stuff they then counteract by creating antibodies. In the same way I have the impression that children develop healthier and more meaningful lives when they learn from their experiences even the painful ones. Now, no one is going to take their child and make them put a key inside the outlet, but if such a thing happens by mischief or accident they surely learn that it is a bad thing.

So here I wonder again. I wonder if the experience of Jesus being human is similar to that. I wonder if by being Mary and Joseph's son, Jesus learned about the difficulties and the suffering that the poor and outcast lived through. As Mónica pointed out in her sermon last week, Jesus' parents surely faced some very difficult challenges. Here we have Mary a teenager who finds herself pregnant before getting married and Joseph who is called to accept her as his wife. They try to go on with their lives as newlyweds but have no safe place for their child to be born because no one will take them in. After their baby is born in a stable, they then have to flee to Egypt because their newborn is sought to be killed by Herod on the account that he represents a menace for his rule. It is a life marked by scarcity and persecution but one also that they were able to pull through. And here we have Jesus growing up in the midst of that difficult life situation. As he went

through life having to face such situations, maybe he learned what Mary had proclaimed in his canticle about God and the poor. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Maybe through that experience of poverty and oppression Jesus learned that God has a special place in his heart for those who suffer. Maybe his own life taught him that he couldn’t rely on the riches of the world but that he could only rely on God. Maybe that’s why he would say years later, while preaching from a mount, “blessed are the poor because yours is the kingdom of God.”

Again, whose child is this? He is certainly the son of Mary and Joseph but he is also the Son of God. It is not only the experience of being poor what set him on the road that his life would eventually take. This is no accident. Mysterious as it may be, God has a plan. Through the prophets, God has announced that humanity would see salvation and deliverance. For that, God would send the Messiah. That Messiah is the light that John the Baptist preached about. The Word through which all things have been created and without which nothing came into being. He has always existed and will have no end. It is truly God being incarnate in the world.

“Don’t you know that I have to be in my Father’s house?” Jesus’ response to Mary are not words of defiance or irreverence. These are words of annunciation and prophecy. Just as Mary proclaimed what God had done through her, now Jesus is proclaiming what God is doing in him. I have to be in my father’s house is meant to say, “I have to be in my Father’s affairs.” I have a job to do. God has a job to do. Jesus is revealing to both his parents and all of us through the gospels what would become the trademark of his ministry: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God because that is why I was sent.” Jesus is not merely indicating where he can be found, he is saying why he is found there. He is in his father’s house, because he is doing God’s work.

And it is precisely in doing God’s work, mission, and ministry that Jesus brings together both his human and his divine natures. In his humanity he is standing in solidarity with each one of us. He is going through our own suffering and is being challenged in the flesh just as we are daily. He feels our pain and shares our need. No longer can it be said that God is afar or that God doesn’t understand what is to be an outcast. And because he knows the human condition, he understands what needs to be done. And what needs to be done can only be done by God. Who else but God can go to the cross to pay the claim that is put on us by our own sin? Who else but God is willing to give his life as ransom for many? Who else but God can face death and then be able to defeat it by resurrecting back to life? Only the God that became human has both the understanding of the human frailty and the power of God to restore and deliver.

In this First Sunday of Christmas, even as we celebrate the birth of baby Jesus, we are already being offered life and salvation through the redemptive work that God is about to begin. Even today we are invited to partake of bread and wine, which is also body and blood. These coexist in the same element just like Jesus was also human and divine. They are given freely, out of pure grace and love for each of one of us. The child Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, who is also the Son of God, knows this and that’s why he is in his Father’s house. Let us all come forward and share with him. Amen.