

My approach to this week's preparations have been...a little casual. A "low Sunday", we call it - the Sunday following a High Holy day (like Christmas or Easter). A weekend that follows a week of rejoicing and house-parties. A Sunday that vaults us (in the lectionary) a full decade ahead of last week in terms of the narrative. From infant Jesus to *enfant terrible* - today a pre-teen Jesus loses his family in the crowd and makes tracks for the temple. A very terrifying prospect for those of us who have raised children in the era of child abductions and very public acts of terrorism. Many of my generation walked their children on modified leashes at the mall, or the beach (we resisted the temptation) so they would not have to endure even the momentary loss of contact (with our children) and thus have our parenting techniques called into question...

So I've resisted the cultural temptation to make this morning's gospel into a parable of parents; the earthly parents of Jesus put in their place by Jesus natural attraction to his heavenly guardian. I'm moved, instead, by the reflections of Richard Swanson (a professor whose weekly blog is called "provoking the gospel")) who reminded me (again) of Jesus' cultural reality. A Jewish boy from an observant Jewish family who finds himself - on the verge of his *bar mitzvah* - in the centre of the Jewish universe. It's important times ahead (for Jesus), and who among us wouldn't want a chance to get some first-rate study time in before the big test? So he stays behind, and when his family finds him — three days later - his response is a casual "where else would I be" that sets our modern sensibilities on edge.

"Smart-aleck kid", we think, just under our breath. "Jesus the rebel" we say (a little louder) - relieved by this glimpse of humanity in our hero. But the episode ends with no punishment, no 'stern talking to', nothing but a gathering of the troops and hitting the road for home. Mary sets the tone for us - treasuring all these things in her heart (as she does) - a phrase that is our cue to think deeply on what we've just encountered. A phrase that permits me to ask: "did you see it? Did you notice?"

An absent, yet engaged Jesus - three days away - who is happily welcomed back into the bosom of those who loved him best. Three days spent in the presence of the faithful - three days spent wrestling with Scripture, devoted completely to the work that (we say) is Go's greatest gift to us - the work of thoughtful, reverent devotion to God.

Devotion

This is the only episode from Scripture that gives us Jesus as a self-reliant youngster; able to make his own decisions but still under the authority of Joseph and Mary. At an age when we expect a certain adventurous rebellion, Jesus gives us devotion; a hunger for the holy, and a rare understanding for one his age (all who heard him were amazed at his understanding...)

A careful reading of this unique passage, reveals that this is NOT Jesus first trip to the city. “Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover...” We are prone to ignoring this bit - or at least, not fully understanding that Luke’s gospel is describing a family of holy habits. Faithful observance of the requirements of the law meant as many as three trip per year (for those who were able) to Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish universe. Jerusalem was not the best place to provoke the civic authorities (as happens at the end of Jesus life), it is also the best place to invoke the heavenly authority. Jerusalem is a place Jesus knows well - from the earliest days of his life. While we are prone to imagine that Jesus shares the omnipotence of God “from the beginning” (he doesn’t - there is plenty that Jesus admits he does not know) what Luke’s gospel tells us is that Jesus’ understanding and scriptural knowledge comes from a habit of devotion - years of study - deep curiosity - a hunger for the things of God.

That hunger in Jesus drives him to (eventually) meet his cousin John on the bank of the Jordan. That Spirit-driven hunger leads Jesus into the wilderness to face his fears in the form of Satan’s tempting. Jesus’ desire for the things of God takes him to places that holy people don’t willingly go - his answers and understanding landed him at the feet of the most powerful person in Judea, and saw him sentenced to death. This is the story we know. But the most important aspect of this story is that Jesus invited those he met to share in his pursuit of God’s commonwealth. “Take up the cross and follow ME” he famously says. The movement that emerges from the shadows of his death into the clear light of his resurrection becomes the Christian church - those who follow the Christ.

We are followers of Jesus. We have been captured by the stories of Jesus - we have been given hope by the notion of a world shaped by God’s mercy and love. And for many, following means believing - recite the creed, say the prayers, sing the songs - accept that the stories are somehow true, and that our acceptance gives us a share in those promises of peace.

Devotion

And belief is important - belief helps us approach the stories of Jesus with something other than indifference. But we are called to follow. From Scripture Jesus invites us to engage in acts of devotion and service. He reaches out to those on the edge of the story - the lame, the poor, the powerless, the outcast - and urges us to do the same. He goes off by himself to pray - he asks unanswerable questions of God, and takes every opportunity (even as a child) to express his devotion to God. In Jesus, curiosity and imagination lead to acts of service and devotion - at every stage of life - and we are followers of Jesus.

Imagine what it would mean, if we followed Jesus down the path of devotion...if we allowed ourselves to be as curious - as eager - as willing to learn and serve and grow in faith - as Jesus is. Imagine if our habits reflected our beliefs; if we spoke and acted as though we truly believed what we profess and pray Sunday by Sunday. The devotion of Jesus moved a small group of his friends to change the world that they lived in. The devotion of one altered the lives of millions through the slow, steady work of history. That work is now the work of we who choose to follow Jesus. Moved by the Spirit of God, may we change the world for Jesus' sake.