

30 December 2012 Colossians 3:12-17 and Luke 2:41-52

I thoroughly enjoyed the simplicity of the nativity that Young Seekers acted out for us last Sunday. Telling the familiar story in a familiar way, allowed us to take in the wonder of the fact of God made man and coming to live among us. It's a story that is told and retold. But in the same way as the children who played the parts of angels, donkeys, shepherds, sheep, Mary, Joseph and the Wise Men in productions in years gone by have now grown up; so we too cannot simply remain basking in the warmth of the familiar story. We too have to grow up.

Our gospel reading is the final part of the childhood story of Jesus that began with the angel appearing to Mary. It takes place in Jerusalem and in the Temple, both of which will be the focus of some of Jesus' sternest teaching as an adult. When Mary and Joseph find him, he is in the Temple. He is listening to the teachers there and is asking insightful questions. When challenged by Mary he says: did you not know that I would have to be getting involved with my Father's work? Both the place where he was found and the words he uses seem to be unexpected.

Jesus then returns to Nazareth where, as he grows older, so he grows in wisdom and in favour with God and with people.

I don't think any of that comes automatically with age! There has to be something else. And the something else has to do with being involved in God's work.

Paul, writing to the Colossians, is seeking to nurture and develop the process of understanding how to co-operate with the divine life that is working within those who follow Jesus. He does this both by writing encouraging letters and also through prayer. The passage we have this morning follows on from one where Paul has warned against anger, rage, bitterness of speech, blasphemy and dirty talk. He tells them to strip off those old habits. It's important to have that context, otherwise the passage we have simply seems cosy rather than being a contrast with those things that tear families and church communities apart. Because it is of course, often much harder to live a life committed to being compassionate, kind, loving, meek and patient. It isn't the soft option. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort. It requires self reflection and offering oneself to hear the honest truth from others. Christian behaviour takes courage and makes us more human, not less. Being tender hearted doesn't mean we are sentimental. Being kind doesn't make us a soft touch and humility isn't the same as low self esteem. Paul recognises that we must learn to forgive one another – and in doing so I wonder if we also ought to ask ourselves what we might need forgiveness for. Perhaps, and this is dangerous thing for me to say, we ought to be ready to be told when we have hurt someone and learn from that to increase our desire to develop compassion, kindness and patience. I remember a few years ago going from the encouragement of being told that I tell the truth with grace to an almost immediate moment of rudeness, of irritation and impatience with a friend such that I made them cry. I was telling the truth but hardly acted with grace. I think too we can sometimes wrap our rudeness up with the self delusion that we are only acting out of love. A love that feels it should be unkind is not a wise love. We might have to tell someone a harsh truth but we need not be unkind when we do so. We need not say it in public.

What support does Paul offer us as we go about this 'growing up'? Paul invites us to share in the peace of Christ. I've been reading the 'Helmsley Chronicles' over Christmas; reflections of a time spent in a rural parish in North Yorkshire – some of which were first published in the Diary section of the Church Times. One thing that made me laugh and then want to cry was the recollection of a church where the order of service had been amended. Where the sharing of the peace should have taken place, it had been struck through in angry red letters with the words – 'There is no peace here'. I'm not suggesting that simply shaking hands with those around us at a given point in the service means that we are automatically at peace with one another. No, Paul says – let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. When we share the peace with each other, we can use it as a time when we put aside those things that irritate us about one another, when we recommit to loving each other and forgiving each other as Christ has loved us. But I suggest that it's also a reminder to us to continue to pray that as we experience for ourselves the love of Christ and the peace that brings us individually so we too can be a channel of that peace to others.

Paul also invites us to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. I take that to mean to become familiar with Jesus' teachings so that when we are faced with a challenge we know the better path to take.

Hymn singing is encouraged! Hurrah! I hear the choir chorus. But look, Paul says we should do so with gratitude in our hearts. I think we can only do that if we understand the words we are singing. There are wonderful stirring hymn tunes – I come from a land that has produced some of the finest – and interestingly my niece who plays trumpet says that when busking she always throws in a few hymns and they earn her plenty of cash – but they are nothing if the

words don't point in an understandable way to God. And there are some great hymns that are sung to tunes that are unmemorable or only memorable for their difficulty. One of the main reasons that John and Charles Wesley wrote hymns was to teach the Bible to those who could not read. The combination of words and music helps us to learn and often to remember when mere reading does not.

Paul finishes by saying –'whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him'.

That phrase 'whatever you do' brings us back to Jesus saying that he was getting involved in his Father's work. We all have work to do. As humans we are hard wired to work. We gain satisfaction and sometimes status from it. But whatever work we do, as Christians we do in the name of Jesus.

God's work is everywhere. And the opportunities we have to join in are everywhere. A casual conversation waiting for a bus will have more impact if we are kind and generous than if we grumble. Someone recently invited me to go in front of them in the queue in Waitrose as I had less in my basket than he had in his trolley. It made me smile for some considerable time afterwards and made me better able to find Christ's peace. There are those in the workplace who are belligerent and frighten those who work for them, eventually becoming less productive as a result. There are those who create a space where people feel respected and trusted and so seek to perform well. While clearly, not all those who lead in that manner will be Christian, but I suggest that anyone who follows Christ should seek to lead in that way.

A church community like ours needs people who are prepared to give time and effort to supporting its activities. It's easy to think – no one needs me, or I won't be missed. I know it's often nicest to be directly asked to do something, indeed sometimes it takes another to recognise your gifts and talents. But if you do sense that God is asking you to do something to serve him in this place, please do speak up! It's not quite that poster of Kitchener pointing fiercely saying 'Your country needs you'; but the more who are involved, often in small unnoticed areas, then the more we get to know one another, to learn to love and serve each other and be a welcoming place for anyone who happens to come through our doors. Instead of Kitchener's rather threatening approach, how about thinking – 'what unique blessing can I bring to this community?' And the answer may surprise us, because we shouldn't automatically assume that what we are currently doing is what God wants us to continue doing. The phrase: 'same old, same old', can apply to our Christian journey. I think that even though we might have once found our niche in answer to that question, we might find that Jesus gives us something else to do.

Yesterday's papers were full of reviews of the year and the Honours List. One of those honoured was the person who organised the Games Makers. But I'm pretty sure most of those games makers deserved in some way to be honoured. In much the same way, if we were to carry out a review of 2012 and honour those who have enriched our lives as St Peters, I would hope that those who wield brooms or tea towels, move chairs, photocopy, make cups of tea and ensure that things are returned to correct place after use and those who underpin our work through prayer – let alone the more obvious tasks – would receive the honour they deserve. Of course, most, if not all, of the work is done without a thought for being honoured. It's nice to be thanked though! Paul encourages us to be thankful – so let us also this next year remember to give thanks when we come across actions that bear witness to lives influenced by Paul's words to the Colossians – lives that are compassionate, kind, humble, meek and patient; forgiving others and seeking forgiveness by others; with the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts.

Amen.

Sarah Thomas 30 December 2012