

Sermon, December 26, 2021

Luke 2:41-52

“And Jesus Grew in Wisdom”

It is that last verse in today’s reading that strikes me as most interesting. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” The words, divine and human, do not only speak to the favor he found in God and the people he had encountered, but they stand at the heart of debates concerning the nature of Jesus Christ from the earliest days of church history to today. Was he divine or only human? The way in which we answer that question influences the way we approach our faith.

In the year 451, the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon declared Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine. The official theological term is “hypostatic union”, Not important for you to remember, but whatever issues rational thought might bring to that, I think it is important to hold those two dimensions in tension. We’ll call it a spiritual mystery beyond our comprehension.

The late historian, Marcus Borg, spoke of two ways to think of Jesus., i.e. the pre-Easter Jesus and the post Easter Jesus. Beginning in the early twentieth century, largely through a book by Albert Schweitzer called “The Quest of the Historical Jesus”, many scholars began doing just that - trying to uncover what could be known about the person, Jesus of Nazareth. This is the pre-Easter Jesus that we find primarily in the three Synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, of the parables, teachings, and wisdom sayings, and of the miracles. From this Jesus we learn much about his beliefs in terms of morals and ethics, as well as what it means to be truly compassionate, forgiving, and merciful, of our obligations to the poor, the weak, the marginalized and oppressed, and, certainly, what it means to have faith, and what it means to love. This is not to mention the centerpiece of his preaching - the coming kingdom of God. We begin to see and understand these things through the actions and words of Jesus of Nazareth.

But then we turn to the writings particularly by the apostle Paul and recognize that he had very little to say about the historical Jesus, but an awful lot about the Risen One - the post-Easter Jesus. This was the Jesus Paul encountered on the road to Damascus- the Jesus through whom we find justification and a restored relationship with God, based on God’s grace and the redeeming work of the cross and the resurrection. Paul also helps us see how a belief and faith in the Risen Christ can lead to the renewal and transformation of our lives.

To point to the pre and post Easter Jesus is not to suggest that they are two different persons, but to grasp the deep spiritual connection between the two. However, it has been my experience that focusing our attention on one more than the other affects the way we understand Christianity as a whole. Some refer to it as the difference between the religion of Jesus versus the religion about Jesus. I believe we have to find a balance between the two.

I also see the Gospel of John as a sort of bridge between the two. There are stories having to do with the life of Jesus as well as being chock full of metaphors having to do with our spiritual connection to him as the Risen Christ.

To begin with, we find Jesus referred to as the incarnation of God's Word. As indicated in an earlier sermon this connects Jesus Christ to the creative and transformative dimensions of the divine, to which we can find our own lives transformed through our faith in him.

Another metaphor is found in the sixth chapter of John where Jesus speaks of himself as the Bread of Life. And he says, "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Then he continues, "I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty". Considering the fact that there are Christians in the world who are physically hungry and thirsty, we probably have to understand him to be talking about a spiritual hunger and thirst. As he says in the fourth chapter of John, speaking to the woman at the well, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty."

Another well-known metaphor for the nature of Jesus Christ is him as the Light of the World. We find in John's eighth chapter, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." Notice his continuing references to life. To walk in the world as one of his disciples is to find a different form of life, which we find through belief and faith in him. This new form of life is also connected to an experience of truth. He says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Despite whatever intellectual problems we might have with the idea of him as being both fully human and fully divine we find within it two different dimensions of our own spiritual journey. In one we find the moral and ethical ways in which we are called, and in the other we find our own renewed fellowship with God born of His gifts of mercy and grace. And, perhaps, it also means that we can learn through him what it means to be fully human, and maybe even discover that being fully human is the same as being fully divine! Amen.

Let us pray: God, most gracious and kind, as always, we place our trust in you as we face the many challenges of our day. Guide us and inspire us through the power of your Holy Spirit. Grant us the gift of faith which we come to better understand when we look to your Son, Jesus Christ. Teach us each day how we might be better disciples looking to him as a model for our lives, leading us in the direction of the fullness of humanity, and in that our own embrace of the divine. Help us to look to the future with hearts and minds filled with hope confident in the depths of your love for us and for the whole of your creation. Amen.

Those in difficult times

Desmond Tutu