

Introduction to the theme

When you think back on your life, what is your most formative experience? Hands up, whose experience was in childhood. Would anyone like to share their experience?

You may have heard the Jesuit saying "Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man." Even before psychology recognised the influence of childhood experiences, there was recognition in many quarters as to how important these were.

In our Gospels, we see very little of Jesus' childhood – the two different (and contradictory) birth narratives, plus two additional stories in Luke. Today we are going to hear one of those stories (slightly expanded so we don't miss out one verse between the Christmas Day reading and today's reading). As you listen to these readings, what do you hear that tells you something about the person that Jesus will become?

Reflection

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Given the importance of childhood in shaping the individual, you might be wondering why there are not more childhood stories of Jesus to make their way into the Gospels. In the style of other biographies of the day, we see very little material from childhood and, also like other biographies of the day, the stories we do hear are of miraculous conception and recognition by wise people of what the child would become.

If this is the "normal" level of writing about childhood in ancient biographies, it poses a very different question. Why was it that about a century after the Gospels were written, did early Christians feel the need to write the infancy Gospels? These were purported to be by the brothers of Jesus, and claimed to tell stories from his childhood.

The stories from these infancy gospels are fantastical. Jesus is shown as multiplying the grain so the poor have enough, bringing his mother a jar full of water by putting it in his cloak, and bringing clay birds to life. On the other hand, these infancy Gospels also had Jesus getting rather upset with teachers trying to teach the alphabet and being so cross at a neighbour's child that he curses and kills the child – not exactly the Jesus shown in the earlier Gospels. This is probably the reason the infancy Gospels fell out of favour so quickly that they were never included in the lists of books to read as scripture (which by the mid fourth Century was the list we now know of as the New Testament).

So, given the paucity of childhood stories in the biographies of the day, why include the story of Jesus being taken to the temple? This story points out two key concepts. Firstly, in this story Mary and Joseph are shown as being a faithful Jewish family. They do everything that is required of them in the Jewish Law.

Luke is writing to a Gentile community around 80CE. We can see his knowledge of the Jewish Law is a bit shaky, so this is written by a Gentile who has some knowledge of the Torah, and this passage shows some of the mistakes he makes in relation to what is required. However, he is writing about Mary and Joseph fulfilling the law to make an important point about the family in which Jesus grew up.

The other key concept is connected to this. Simeon and Anna are both shown to be faithful Jewish people worshiping Yahweh as they knew how. They were watching and waiting for the coming Messiah and because of this, they are where they need to be in order to see him as an infant. Regardless of how Anna's life is translated, we know she is very old for a woman of her day. It may be coincidence, but she fits the requirements of the early church to be granted a widow's pension, which was a development that came later.

In the birth narrative, we see the outsiders – the shepherds – recognising the Christ-child, thanks to the message of a bunch of Angels; in this story, we see people who were insiders recognising the Christ-child too, but this time because of their openness to God. It would have been very easy to miss this child among all the others who were supposed to be redeemed as the first-born child.

Why would the author of Luke, a Gentile Christian writing to a Gentile community, make such a point to show Jewish insiders recognising the Christ-child? Even much earlier than the writing of this Gospel there was conflict between the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. We see glimpses of this in Paul's letter to the Galatians, from which we heard today. Paul was writing this letter in response to the question of whether one had to be Jewish in order to be Christian. These days we do not really understand what this argument was about, but essentially it was about public levels of commitment – for the men, at least. Were the Gentiles being let off easily if they did not have to undergo the full requirements of the Jewish law? This was something that all and sundry would know about if they went to the public baths. And so, there was a major controversy.

Paul's answer was about grace. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. Besides, what was the point of Christ's death if what was really needed was to keep particular laws? As an aside, over the years the church, denominations and individual congregations, have attempted to resurrect Law in different ways. Whenever we put tradition or culture, or "our way of worshiping is the right way" over love, compassion, and inclusion, we are siding with those who would have Gentiles first become Jewish in order to be part of the Christian community.

Approximately thirty years after Paul wrote Galatians, the author of Luke's Gospel was writing to his Gentile community. The problem is quite possibly reversed. After the disastrous uprising that ended with the Siege of Jerusalem in 70CE, the Jewish Christians were thrown out of the Synagogues. Many of them would have looked to other places for sanctuary where they could start again. It is quite feasible that over the past few years Jewish Christians had arrived into Luke's community. The insiders and outsiders of the community are swapped around and there must have been a lot of tension. For these Jewish Christians, there would have been the need to explore what it meant to continue their cultural practices in another land and within a community that had different practices.

And so Luke tells his infancy stories of Jesus where both insiders and outsiders recognise the Christ-child and respond to him. He makes his point of the parents following all the Jewish customs, because they are Jews and this is important for them. After all, Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian.

So, by placing these two stories side by side, the Gospel asks us to reflect on insiders and outsiders in our community. Can we find a way to care for both groups and make both groups just as welcome? What do we have to give up in order to be more welcoming?