

First Sunday of Christmas – 29 December 2024

Message – The importance of perspective

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, help us to see with your eyes, and to see with our neighbours' eyes. **Amen.**

Having read what all six of my commentaries on Luke have to say on today's gospel passage, I am none the wiser. Several note that others claim too much for this passage yet then themselves assume information that is not within this or any other passage to draw their own conclusions.

This is the only gospel story of Jesus between the visit of the Magi when he was about one and his baptism when he was about thirty. This story is unique to Luke. It is the first story in Luke's gospel in which Jesus speaks. Luke's stated purpose in writing his gospel was to create an ordered account. So, it becomes hard to know whether it is included with a specific purpose or as a matter of completeness.

We can take it that Luke saw no conflict between his nativity narrative and this story. So, we must read this story in that light. The commentaries focus on Jesus' statement that he was The Child of God. It was not unusual for Jews to refer to God as 'My Father in Heaven' but Jesus does not qualify it with 'in Heaven'. It is a stronger claim than would normally be made.

Commentators see in this story a tension between the two aspects of God incarnate, between his humanity and his divinity. Yet, if we see such a tension, it might seem that it is his humanity that is put to the fore as he returns home and obeys his parents.

I am left wondering if this is a more human and humbler story than the commentators think. It is a simple part of our growing up that we learn to see the world from the perspective of others. Here Jesus learns that lesson.

The gospels tell us nothing of Jesus as he was growing up. We do not know what he was like when he was at home. Perhaps, he the unusual child who spent all his time discussing the scriptures with the local synagogue leaders. We do not know what he was like when he was in Jerusalem. Perhaps, he had spent every day of the festival in the temple having such discussions. We do not know what Mary and Joseph had shared with Jesus of his birth. Perhaps, Mary had told him that Gabriel had said he would be called *'The Son of God.'* (Luke 1:35)

There are huge gaps in our knowledge. The most we can say is that Jesus had some understanding of having a deep relationship with God and that there was a difference of perspective between him and his parents.

To start to build theology on these limited statements is a precarious endeavour so how can we apply any of this to our own lives?

It appears, from what we are told, that Jesus did see that his parents had a different perspective from the one that he had. This is a normal part of growing up. We move from thinking only of ourselves to being able to see the perspective of others, which we can use for good, to care for them, or for more dubious reasons, such as manipulating them.

In this case, it appears Jesus learnt that there was a different

way of honouring his relationship with God. By obeying his parents, he was honouring God through the keeping of the fifth commandment, *'honour your father and your mother'* (Ex 20:12, Deut 5:16). It's the fourth commandment if you are Samaritan or Catholic or Calvinist.

It is not clear what if anything Mary and Joseph learnt; they did not understand in the moment though *'[Mary] treasured all these things in her heart.'* (50). However, even if we do not understand another's perspective it is still possible to allow space for it. We do not need to understand why a thing is important to someone only to notice that it is and to honour that and give or create space for that.

Seeing another person's perspective can be profoundly challenging. I imagine that many of you have had the experience of trying to do something good and it being misunderstood, ignored, or even causing offence. We are imperfect, we lack omniscience, and so we are going to make mistakes sometimes. Some time we need the generosity of others understanding our perspective.

None of us share exactly the same life experiences. There are plenty of events in the life of Aotearoa that are emblazoned on the consciousness of those who have lived here longer than I have that are not a part of my experience. Even when they are explained to me, because I have not lived through them, I cannot fully understand.

So it is for all of us, when we compare our lives with another person's. Each of us has our own unique life experiences. One of the gifts of chaplaincy is the opportunity to hear the life stories of a diverse range of

people and the effect that it has on their lives, even if I cannot fully understand I can at least accept the reality.

All of us view life with our own perspective. This provides a filter and an interpretive framework. Any two of us may see the same events, hear the same information, and still receive and interpret it very differently. We cannot prevent this; we can only try to be aware of our own biases and possibly aware of the biases of others.

And, all of this does not just apply to our dealings with others. It also applies to our ourselves. It is difficult when looking back on events to be unbiased in the analysis of our choices because we now know the outcome. If the outcome was negative, we may be self-critical. If the outcome was positive, we may feel we made a great choice. In both cases, it may well be a matter of factors beyond our control and have very little to do with our choices.

Whether we are trying to enter the perspective of someone else or of our former selves or future selves, we need empathy. We need the ability to suffer with, or share joy with, the other. This does not require our full understanding of the other, only the acknowledgment of the reality of their reactions and feelings.

For me, as someone who suffers from depression, it is far easier to enter into the suffering of others than it is to enter into the joy of others though I hope I at least don't get in the way of their joy too often but it is all too easy for me to notice the potential problems and worries and not to enter the moment of joy.

For others, with a more positive outlook on the world, it

may be easy to enter into the joy of others but much harder to enter into their suffering. Many people will tell you of some truly terrible responses to suffering. Yet, none of us really want our happy bubble burst so it is hard to make the transition to such a different perspective.

For most of us, not only does our perspective change with age – we are probably all hoping that we will *‘increase in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour.’* But it even changes with mood and circumstances and numerous other factors. We’re all a bit complicated.

But we all also have the ability to step back and consider the perspective of others. If we are working towards shared goals, this has great power. Our diverse perspectives can help us to find creative solutions to the challenges we face. No one of us has all the right answers. There will inevitably be things that we don’t know or haven’t experienced or haven’t considered. However, when we bring together all of our perspectives, experiences, knowledge, and talents, then we can do amazing things but only if we take the time to see one another’s perspectives.

May we all share our perspectives, listen to one another, learn from one another, and do amazing things, in the coming year and years to come. Amen. Amen.