

...be not conformed to this [age]; but be ... transformed by the renewing of your mind

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In many ways, the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus and his years as a child are as frustrating as they are revealing. They tell us so much; but they tell us so little at the very same time. Other than the stories of Christmas and Epiphany, with the shepherds and the angels and the magi and the star, we have one story from the time when he was 40 days old; and another story, this week's Gospel, of an event when he was 12 years old. Other than that, we hear mostly crickets; until years later, when he begins his public ministry at the age of 30. Two stories to cover nearly three decades.

And the fact that we have this huge chronological gap in the text led some to create stories to fill the vacuum: texts from 150 or 200 or 300 years after the time of Jesus that speak of events from his childhood; stories of Jesus fashioning birds from clay and breathing life into them; of Jesus restoring to life a friend who had fallen from a roof and healing a man who had injured his foot with an axe; even darker tales of Jesus cursing a boy who had angered him, who falls dead, and blinding the boy's parents when they express their anger; and then later raising the boy from the dead and healing the parents; of an eight year old Jesus feeding all the poor of the village with a great harvest that he had produced from planting just one seed; even a story of Jesus bringing life to a dried fish.¹ The character of Jesus is so compelling that we instinctively want to know more; and in the early centuries many used their imagination to flesh out the story. To fill in the gaps.

But, as challenging as some of those stories may be, the image of Christ in this week's Gospel is also a challenge; maybe even as challenging as some of those strange stories that others made up. It's a challenge because it seems to fly in the face of some of the assumptions that we are tempted to make about the kind of child that we imagine Jesus must have been if he was, as we believe, "perfect God" and "perfect man", as we say in the Creed of St. Athanasius.

Because the Jesus that we see in this week's Gospel seems far from perfect; maybe a lot more like a rebellious near-teenager than the perfect and holy Son of God; defying his parents by staying in Jerusalem when the time came to head back home; which he makes worse – after they find him – by giving them what seems like a bit of lip, as we might say. "How did you not know..." he says, seeming to question their judgement as just about every adolescent does at some point with their parents. Which again, he seems to make worse by reminding Joseph and Mary that Joseph isn't really his father: "Did you not know that I must be about my father's business?"

My 'real' father's business.

Now, I don't know what would have happened to you if you'd given your parents that kind of answer when you were a teenager, but I have a fairly good recollection of what happened to me when I did. Because I certainly did.

But for all of the challenges that this week's Gospel gives us, it is still incredibly

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infancy_Gospel_of_Thomas
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancythomas.html>

helpful. Because it reminds us that there is always going to be a tension between what passes as wisdom in this world and the deeper wisdom that comes from God; a tension between the principles and values that run this very fragmented and divided world and the principles and values of the kingdom of God; a tension that reminds us that following Christ faithfully will often require us to choose a different path than the one that the world would have a choose; the harder path of patience and sacrifice and love.

In this week's Epistle St. Paul reminds us that we must not be ... *conformed to this [age]; that we are to: be ... transformed by the renewing of [our] mind, that [we] may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.*

Taking its cue from the remarkable wisdom of the young boy Jesus, talking in the Temple with the teachers and doctors of the Law, amazing them with his 'understanding and answers', this week's Epistle reminds us that following Christ, really following Christ, will require from us a commitment to a kind of wisdom that the world cannot offer; and of the dangers we all face when we surrender our thoughts and ideas to the thoughts and ideas of this age, or any age; and of the deep disorder that will come whenever we allow the principles and values of a broken world to shape the principles and values upon which we live.

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In Paul's words we are to be 'transformed'; that is, we are to show outwardly who we really are inwardly, in Christ. Allowing the image of our incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord; the image which was planted within us at our creation; the image which was remade in us by Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection; the image which is upheld within us every day by the Holy Spirit; [allowing the image of our compassionate and forgiving and loving God to shine from us as a much-needed light in the midst of a world which is all too dark and frightening.

The Season of Epiphany isn't just about discovering who Jesus is as we hear again the Gospel stories of his revealing; first to the magi, the wisemen, in Bethlehem; and then the teachers and doctors in the Temple; and next week to the disciples and guests at the wedding feast in Cana; and the week after, to a centurion in Capernaum.

The Season of Epiphany is also about discovering who we are: as those made and remade in the image of love; and as those who are called not to live just as solitary individuals pursuing our solitary agendas but as members of a great Body; a Body in which our lives find meaning and purpose when each member does those things which they are called to do for the common good; for the life and love of the whole Body.

The world would tell us that our highest good is found in the pursuit of individual goods; individual agendas and desires. But the Gospel tells us that we find ourselves in seeking the common good; in losing ourselves in Christ. That's who we are as the Body of Christ. And that's the image we are called to share in a very broken and divided world. That's the light we are called to shine into this world's darkness, never just conforming to humanity's reckless pursuit of individual goals, of anger and division and disunity, but, by Grace, being transformed into a living Body; finding our purpose and finding our hope in the life that we share together, patiently, compassionately, in Christ.

... so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another