

Epiphany I Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Have you ever lost track of your child? We all react immediately with sympathy in our gut, to news and amber alerts of lost children, and every parent knows in some small way that terror of a missing child. Some of you may have lost a child, either one who has gone missing or passed away. But let me suggest that for Christians who have lost their children, the place to find them in is in the Father's house. It is here in our Father's house that we may be reassured that they are in the Father's house, and it is finally in the Temple, the heaven of God, that we shall be reunited.

So we can understand something of Mary's panic, anger, frustration, and relief when she says to Jesus, "How could you do this? Your father and I have been in a complete panic looking for you!" Now, remember that they were traveling in a caravan

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of extended family and the boy was twelve, on the edge of manhood in their culture. Jesus answers, “Why were you looking for me? You knew where I would be, at my Father’s work – in my Father’s house.”

Mary had said, “Your father and I were anxiously searching for you,” but Jesus reminds her of the priority of his relationship with, and his duty to, his heavenly Father. There is the sense of a mild rebuke in his answer to his mother and parents.

Especially parents of twelve-year-olds and teenagers may recognize the attitude. The difference is that our children are not divine. We may be relieved, though, to hear the end of today’s reading. Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. That obedience is not something we assume of twelve-year-old boys!

At this young age, Jesus manifests the wisdom of God, discoursing with the doctors of the Temple. This is a wisdom

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from above. But we have in whole in that Gospel a portrait of Jesus, in Jerusalem and at Nazareth, in the Temple and at home.

These two centres of our Lord's early life, Jerusalem and Nazareth, are most important, for they represent Temple and Home. Jesus was raised, then, in both. And all Christian rearing or education must share these twin centres of instruction and worship. The older Baptismal services were clear that there was an obligation to provide teaching and prayer at home, and instruction and worship at Church. One is not adequate without the other.

So our Lord grew in favour with God and men. Luke alone provides us with this account, to fill in anything of our Lord's life from his fortieth day to his thirtieth year. What Luke shows us, then, of our Lord's early life, is a life spent fulfilling one's duty towards God and parents.

Three simple words are before us today: Duty, Sacrifice,

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and Humility. Can you imagine three words more likely to set a congregation to sleep - duty, sacrifice and humility?

And worse, they are not just sleepy words; they are in many ways offensive to our hearts and minds. For we have a very deflated sense of what our bounden duty and service is, and we are often offended by the claims of duty upon us, whether as tax payers or members of a congregation. Jesus himself warns us about this finite sense of duty before God: "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

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Our self-righteousness stems from just this under-estimation of our duty to God and neighbour. And what of sacrifice? What appetite do we have for that in our hearts and minds, at work and at home, in our communities and pocket-books and pews? And if duty and sacrifice are counter-cultural, what can we say of humility? This Christian virtue is regarded by the world as a vice, a worthless and crippling weakness. And that culture blows in the door of the Church unchecked.

Yet it is these three things that we find in the Gospel portrait of our Lord's youth. His parents go to Temple in Jerusalem every year, as they are bound, and Jesus shows his sense of duty to his heavenly Father, while still giving due obedience to his earthly parents. The Gospel is about Jesus fulfilling his duty.

And the backdrop of all this is first of all the Temple. Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the

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Passover. And Jesus went as well, as he would continue to do, until he himself became the Passover Lamb. The Temple was the place of sacrifice, and Jesus in the Temple at Passover must make us think of how he, in himself, would fulfill both the Temple and the Passover. This is the first record of Christ teaching, and we are reminded by his teaching in the Temple, that he came to teach and to offer himself as the one and final sacrifice.

Finally, we have here a young Jesus, with an obvious, human awareness of his unique relationship with God, and with a learning that amazed the teachers of the Temple. Yet he still went down to Nazareth and lived in obedience to his parents. It all speaks to us of the humility of the son of God, born of an unwed mother in a barn, living for a season as a refugee, and growing up in a town with a bad reputation.

What we see of Jesus in that Gospel portrait is Duty,

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Sacrifice and Humility. And in the great pattern of Epiphany, these are the same things about which St. Paul speaks in the Epistle.

Paul makes his plea to the Romans, and to us, on the basis of our justification by faith in Jesus Christ. Because of salvation in Christ, he urges us to live and think and act in certain ways. He says, “Therefore, I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy.” Whatever Paul is going to tell us, we must give first place to God’s mercy, for it is always his mercy and grace which come first. We love only because he first loved us. We know him because he first knew us. So the Epistle is really about our response to God’s mercy. What Paul outlines is our duty as Christians, and the remainder of Romans lays out our duty to God and neighbour. For Christians, then, a sense of duty comes not from guilt or fear, but rather from gratitude and love. In view of God’s mercy in Jesus Christ, we consider how we

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ought to think and love and behave.

And Paul tells us, in summary form, that our duty to God is sacrifice, and our duty to our neighbour is humility. We are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, in view of God's mercy in Jesus Christ, who offered his body as a dying sacrifice for us.

This sacrifice is a spiritual act of worship, and it involves striving for holiness. Paul makes the same point in 1st

Corinthians : "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price.

Therefore honor God with your body." But God wants not only our bodies, but our hearts and minds as well - ourselves, our souls and bodies - so we are called on to give our minds to him, for renewing our wills to his good will.

Then he lays out our duty to one another within the body, and it is humility. 1. Don't think too much of yourself, 2.

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Remember, God has given you everything you have and 3. You need each other within the body. These three constitute humility: not thinking too much of ourselves, being mindful of our total dependence upon God, and recalling our need for each other.

Our duty is then sacrifice to God and humility towards one another. And in this, our Lord himself shows us the way, for it is his duty, his sacrifice and his humility, which are our salvation. He humbled himself for us and made in himself the sacrifice for our sins to the Father. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death. What we have on our own is disobedience, sin and pride, and Paul is very clear in Romans that these belong to Jew and Gentile - to all of us alike. We cannot save ourselves by doing our duty, by sacrifice or by humility. But in thankful imitation of our Saviour, we seek to grow in his likeness.

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In this season of Epiphany, we think of the offerings of those wise men. But their offering is in prophetic response to him who gave himself for us, the dutiful son of God, the Saviour who sacrificed himself, and who is our humble king. Yet in response to his mercy, we are called to imitate him and his dutifulness, his sacrifice and his humility. So Gold of obedience and incense of lowliness, bring, and adore him; the Lord is his name. Amen.