



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“An Ordinary Child?”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

January 6, 2019; Second Sunday in Christmas (Epiphany Sunday)

Reading: Infancy Thomas 2:1-4; Luke 2:41-52; Excerpt from Karl Rahner's *The Great Church Year*

Traditionally Christians have been pious about Jesus' childhood. Asked whether or not Jesus was an ordinary child many would say no. They would read a story like what we heard from Luke and point to Jesus sitting with elders in the Temple, everyone amazed at the twelve year old's words. Telling them similar skills were attributed as proof of future greatness to the Buddha, Cyrus the Great, Octavius, among others, becomes evidence of Jesus' specialness rather than a source of skepticism.

No wonder we ended up with speculative gospels like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. It's filled with stories beyond birds of clay and bringing them to life. Jesus raises from the dead a boy that fell off a roof, brings water to his mom in a cloak when he broke the jug, and heals his brother after he'd been bitten by a poisonous snake. Later more fanciful gospels have Jesus already talking as an infant, taming dragons and commanding a palm tree to bend so Mary can pick its fruit. Each story further underscores that Jesus was no ordinary child.

And yet I see the opposite in our story from Luke. Yes, he is sitting in the Temple with the elders but I've met more than a few twelve year olds who are quite insightful. Jesus is not there to hold court but to have a lively conversation. At twelve he is old enough to be *bar mitzvahed*. It is time for him to pull away from his mom and seek out the company of adult males. You can hear this desire for independence in the way he talks back to Mary. You can practically hear him roll his eyes when she says how worried they were. It's exasperatingly ordinary tween behaviour. Even the Infancy Gospel of Thomas suggests his ordinariness. When you look past the miraculous you are left with Jesus acting like a child. Why clap his hands so the clay birds fly away if not to get rid of the proof he'd broken the Sabbath? He brought the boy back to life because he had been accused of pushing him and needed someone to say otherwise. And what child doesn't want to disappoint their mom and so will find another way to fulfill her request often with comic results?

While the piety was understandable as a way to show Jesus honour, and by extension his family, it ended up as a way to push the divine away, to assume that somehow G-d is far from us when the wisdom offered at Christmas is the exact opposite, that G-d is Emmanuel, the divine revealed in an ordinary life. This is an aspect of the Magi story that we traditionally hear on this day. The wise ones assumed a new king would be in a palace but discovered him in a village with humble parents. There is a tradition in some denominations of seeing Jesus, Mary and Joseph as the Holy Family, models for us to look up to. For this to be possible we can't put this family on a pedestal. The expectations of holiness have to be achievable or we're left feeling woefully inadequate.

Fortunately the exchange between Jesus and his parents is not pedestal worthy but proof of an ordinary family navigating the tensions of childhood development: sadness as a child draws away and seeks independence, fear and worry as the same child proves they still have lots of growing up to

do, hurt as the child lashes out, joy as they become adults. The ordinariness of the story offers hope. Because we see this family as holy it points to the possibility that we're vessels of the same grace. We hear this wisdom in Rahner's words about the new year. A year mirrors the pilgrimage of our lives, including yearning and suffering as well as love. "He shall accept them," we're told "And we shall find him." We shall meet the divine in all aspects of our lives.

This is the wisdom we celebrate in the notion of sacramentality. Beyond our two sacraments of baptism and communion, this is the idea that we can encounter the holy in ordinary things. We define sacraments as visible signs of invisible grace. As such Augustine thought there may be as many as three hundred sacraments. Drawing on the significance of the Incarnation, he affirmed how nearly anything can be a channel of holy love. But people like boxing things in, even the mystery we call G-d, and so defining sacraments as instituted by Christ, by the middle ages we narrowed them to seven, and then as Protestants saying institution must be in the gospels further defined only two. While I affirm this we do end up losing the wisdom of including marriage within the sacramental sphere. Marriage as a visible sign of invisible grace affirms that in all the gifts and struggles of family life - the shared breath of lovers, the intimate bond with a suckling child, the squabbles over chores, the anxiety of a child out past curfew, even moments we hurt each other - this gift of committed love, for opposite and same gender couples, is one of grace.

This is why there was wisdom in anointing of the sick and confession being part of the mix too. I don't mean this in terms of sacraments strictly defined but the broader recognition that struggles of life, moments of suffering and even moral failing, can be moments of profound grace. At our most vulnerable we release our need for control and we can be held profoundly by divine mercy and love. This is why we see sadness in our readings and not just wonder and joy. Like the Magi story's inclusion of Joseph and Mary fleeing with Jesus to Egypt, the first two chapters of Luke offer all the themes of the gospel. Simeon says a sword will pierce Mary's heart and today's story points to the end of the gospel with Mary and Joseph like the disciples abandoning Jesus after the Passover but find him alive three days later. We honour this in communion. We recall Jesus' life and acknowledge his death, ever conscious that in the midst of loss there is an opening into love.

And so it's appropriate that today we gather around the table and celebrate this sacrament. As we do we uphold the grace revealed in ordinary things, in joyful, frustrating, heartbreaking things, grace revealed in bread and wine, in a community praying, in a couple holding hands, even in an exasperating conversation between a tween and his parents. Like Jesus we are ordinary children. But in all aspects of our lives, even those that stretch us, we encounter G-d's extraordinary love. Amen.