

## “Was Jesus Ever Spanked?”

Date: 13 January 2019

Text: Luke 2: 40 – 52, Philippians 2:5-11, Hebrews 2: 17 - 18

Rev. Peter Coutts

What was the childhood of Jesus like? We seem to know all about his birth from the gospels, and we know quite a bit about the final few years of his adult life. But what was Jesus like as a toddler, and a teenager? Did he carry water for his mother and sweep up after his dad in the carpenter's shop? Did he get straight "A's" in school? Was Jesus ever spanked? Now, you may think this is a funny question, or even a heretical question! But what is your gut guess answer to that question? Was Jesus ever spanked? There is no right or wrong answer – It's all speculation anyways. But how we answer that question can say a lot about *our sense of who Jesus is to you*.

The question actually plays with a very big and important theological topic: the dual nature of Jesus. We say he was “fully God and fully human”. It speaks to our sense of “incarnation”: that this part of our Trinitarian God came to indwell human form. When did Jesus recognize his own uniqueness? When did he appreciate that God was his true Father? These are interesting questions which are more than just theoretical. How we understand this dual nature of Christ can have a big, practical impact on our sense of who Christ can be for us. If you think “Jesus was never spanked!” then you probably emphasize Jesus divine aspect. If you think Jesus may have been spanked, then you lean perhaps more towards his human qualities.

This morning we read the only Biblical account of Jesus childhood, but there are many stories of the childhood of Jesus within the writings of the early church beyond scripture. One tells of Jesus as a boy moulding little birds out of mud, and then giving that damp dust life – with these newly created birds springing off in flight. Another tale tells of Jesus being the butt of the cruelty of two other boys, and in his anger the boy Jesus struck his two taunters dead. Now, that doesn't quite sound like the Jesus we know from the Bible! There are a handful of stories like these that greatly emphasize Jesus' divinity and power. But such stories weren't enfolded into the gospels we have for a few reasons, one being that they don't point to that balance of Jesus being BOTH fully human and fully divine.

In the story we read from Luke we find BOTH his divinity and humanity equally evident. The incident happened when Jesus was 12 – it's a young but a thoughtful age. His parents, it seems, were faithful people who celebrated the festivals. They made the annual trip to Jerusalem for the Passover. They would have brought a lamb to the Temple to be ritually slaughtered as a sacrifice. Mary then would have prepared the lamb and unleavened bread for a sundown dinner. The passage says that once they had fulfilled all the requirements of the feast, they gathered together their friends and relatives – the people they came with -- and began the journey back to Nazareth (a distance of about 100 kilometres). But at the end of the first day, Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus was not with them amongst the many pilgrims. Three frantic days later they found him at the Temple among the teachers, listening and questioning.

It's in the conversation that followed that we get a first glimpse into a sense of the dual nature of Jesus. We see the God-side in his uncanny wisdom -- that depth of understanding which amazed all who heard him. We know Luke wants us to notice this because the verse that starts this story and the one which ends it both speak of Jesus' growing wisdom throughout his youth. We also find a recognition on Jesus part of his special relationship with God. He said to his parents, "did you not know I would be in my Father's house". Others versions translate it as "did you not realize I would be about my Father's business". Here, Luke would have us see that at the age of 12, Jesus was already had a sense of his connection with God. Yet those around him saw only his humanity. The Pharisees were amazed at the depth of the understanding this boy had, and yet it seems they perceived him only as a precocious child. We find the same reaction in his parents. Now, we'd assume after all the hoopla of his birth, with the coming and going of angels..... and the declarations of Elizabeth and Zechariah, with the comings and goings of the shepherds and the wise men... *(my goodness!)* after all that we would assume they knew what we know now in hindsight: that Jesus was the son of God, and that-- OF COURSE -- he would be in the Temple. But verse 50 says, "But they did not understand the statement which he had made to them". They didn't look at him as divine. He was their child, albeit their very special child. Human, as far as the eye could see.

This perception would follow Jesus the rest of his life. Time and again his family, friends, the disciples, and the authorities would assume he was just a person -- gifted to be sure but a human all the same. Only rarely do we find among the people who encountered him a conviction that he was the Messiah. It was only in the hindsight of the resurrection and the blessing of the Holy Spirit that they TRULY KNEW he was God made flesh.

It can be hard to get your head around the idea that Jesus could be fully human and fully divine at the same time. Because of that we can tend to lean more towards one side or the other. Our tendency, perhaps, is to emphasize the divinity of Christ: to think of him as the son of God, as the miracle worker and saviour. At first pass we might not think of his human qualities: his real suffering in the wilderness temptation, his sorrow for his friend Lazarus in death, the anger he felt when he threw the money changers out of the temple, the anxiety he felt on the Mount of Olives the night before his crucifixion, the humiliation and pain of the trial and beating and the cross.

But we really need both. The divine side is the side of power, the side that can make a difference for the world, the side that renews humanity. The human side is the side of compassion: the side that can understand us, touch us, comfort us, walk with us, to respond to our prayers. The divine side inspires us to see the greatness of God. The human side helps us know that this great God is also approachable and full of grace.

An analogy. When I was quite young, I had a brilliant thought about a humidity indicator we had in the house: if it were immersed in water then the indicator should read 100%! I tried my experiment and totally wrecked the indicator. My mother treated me with understanding. Many years later, our son Danny as a toddler made a brilliant discovery: when you turn the

silver handle on the toilet everything in the toilet bowl disappears! So on Christmas Day he took a big red ribbon bow and tried to make it disappear. It plugged up the toilet, and turned me into a Christmas plumber. Did we get angry with Danny? No: I did the same kind of stuff when I was his age. I knew what it was like to be very young, because I once was very young.

The very Son of God (who is part of the Trinity) knows what it is like to be human because he is fully human. We read in Philippians that “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself further and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8). God, stepping down to our level, for our sake. Then, we find in Hebrews the benefit of it. “Therefore he **had** to become like his brothers and sisters in **every** respect, so that he might... make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself faced trials by what he suffered, he is able to help those who face trials” (Hebrews 2:17-18). Once becoming like one of us, we could be assured that he would understand our needs and faults, that he can walk with us and help us... because he has been there himself.

Without his divinity, there would be no help for us. Without his humanity, we could feel helpless in reaching for it. Perhaps like Jesus’ parents we still find it hard to understand. But like the people that day in the temple we still look on in amazement. For the Christ, who was in the form of God, chose to empty himself, take human form. It is overwhelming that the Son of God would go to that extent for our sakes.