

# THE ADOLESCENCE OF JESUS AND GROWING UP IN CHRIST

By JOHN PRIDMORE

**I** AM MOVED BY ONE MEMORY above all others of my visits to the Holy Land. 'The Basilica of Jesus the Adolescent' is not on any of the package pilgrimages. Long may it be spared. It is the chapel of a trade school, run by the Salesians of Don Bosco, set high in the hills above Nazareth. Here teenage Palestinians are trained, some still to be carpenters, many today for something more sophisticated. At the hour of my visit they are still in their classes and I have the great chapel, dedicated to a boy of their age, to myself. I pause before a statue of the teenage Jesus and grieve for all in the long wilderness that lies between childhood and adulthood. And suddenly it dawns on me just how important it is that Jesus was driven into that wilderness too.

The notion of the adolescence of Jesus is one on which it is extremely difficult for the Christian imagination to gain any purchase. We are able to picture the baby Jesus, even if the familiar images of his infancy ('no crying he makes')<sup>1</sup> invite mirth if not nausea. Equally, Jesus the adult is someone we can begin to visualize, and countless eight-day retreatants are invited to do just that. But a teenage Jesus, neither child nor adult, his voice neither up nor down, a Jesus with spots, is out of our imaginative reach.

With the one exception of the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple the gospels are silent about the life of Jesus between his birth and his baptism. Where the gospels are silent perhaps we should be silent too. The speculations, both patristic and contemporary, of those who have felt no need for such reticence constitute a sorry ragbag of the grotesque, the sentimental and the absurd.

There is, however, one commanding reason why we must stay a little longer with this unfamiliar notion of Jesus the adolescent. It is that we believe in the incarnation. God in Christ became one of us. But unless we are 'adoptionists' we hold that the Word took human flesh from his mother at Nazareth. The historical Jesus was fully God and fully man from his conception, not, say, from his baptism. We claim that once on

earth a life was lived in which at every stage, in infancy and childhood, in youth and mature adulthood, the human and the divine were united.

God, incarnate in the child and in the adult, was incarnate too in one neither child nor adult, one both child and adult, one sometimes child and sometimes adult. The apocryphalists, ancient and modern, seek to edify us with tales of what this unique human being did during the 'hidden years'. But they miss the point. The Christian understanding of the incarnation does not invite speculation about the character and conduct of a certain Jesus bar-Joseph, a youth of first-century Nazareth about whom nothing is known. Faith in the incarnation requires of us the belief that there was someone whose adolescent life was lived in abiding union with God. What form that life took during those turbulent and transitional years we do not know except that it was not the life of a prodigy or freak.

The heart of the matter is that the doctrine of the incarnation, here as always, is truth about us as well as truth about Jesus. The truth for us is that there is a life in relationship to God appropriate to the years when the child is becoming an adult. A model of Christian growth which postpones to adulthood any possibility of the fulness of a relationship with God is a denial of the incarnation.

There is more about this in the New Testament than we have noticed. The familiar story about the boy Jesus in the Temple has an introduction and a conclusion which are often overlooked.

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him. (Lk 2:40)

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour. (Lk 2:52)

The first of the statements looks back across the childhood of Jesus; the second looks ahead to his teenage years.

These verses have been regarded by some commentators as no more than editorial seams, examples of the dabs of glue applied between the separate 'pericopes'<sup>2</sup> beloved of the form-critics. But they are far more important than that. Luke's narrative recalls the account of the boyhood of Samuel (1 Sam 1—3). The implication of that account is that a young person's physical development and her or his maturing human relationships may be accompanied by a matching spiritual development, by a growth in relationship to God. Luke's purpose is to state that such a development was true of Jesus.

Luke does not of course anticipate the christological controversies of later church history about the relationship of the divine and human

natures in the person of Jesus. But he does imply that in his childhood and on into his young adult years Jesus was relating to other people and to God in ways that were not defective because they were not those of an adult. Throughout his adolescence, as throughout his childhood, Jesus lived to God and to others in that manner which was appropriate to his age.

It follows that there is a pattern of adolescence and young adulthood, as of childhood, in the incarnation of the growing Jesus. The essence of the pattern is not that commended by Mrs Alexander, that Christian teenagers too ‘all must be/Mild, obedient, good as he’.<sup>3</sup> The adolescence of Jesus does not provide a blueprint of adolescent conduct. It does, however, confer infinite worth on a stage of life from which, it is sometimes felt, all glory has departed. If Jesus was as much at one with God in adolescence as in adulthood then it must be affirmed that there is for all young people, in those least propitious years, the potential of life in relation to God that is no less complete, no less ‘a finished product’, and that it is not the same as that of the adult. We should in principle have no problem about the possibility of teenage saints, even if we take leave to doubt that inordinate piety is necessary for sanctity in sixteen-year-olds.

The incarnational model of Christian development has its scriptural foundation in Luke’s commentary on how Jesus grows. The patristic foundation is in the familiar, though not sufficiently familiar, claim of Irenaeus that Jesus made all ages his.

Being a Master, therefore, he also possessed the age of a Master, not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in himself that law which he had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to himself. For he came to save all through means of himself – all, I say, who through him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age . . . a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them to the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

It is sometimes argued that Irenaeus’ argument breaks down in that there are stages and conditions of life which Jesus did not experience. Jesus, Irenaeus goes on to claim, ‘was an old man for old men’. The suggestive reflection has now become a conceit, put forward playfully in spite of the gospel record. But the force of Irenaeus’ argument does

not depend on Jesus having himself lived at every human age and in every human circumstance. His insistence is that God in Christ does not confine his intervention in human affairs to a stage appearance. Humanity is not assumed at one age and shed at another. In that sense it was an all-age incarnation. In principle for all ages, and in practice for those thirty or so years, human life was hallowed by the divine.

For Irenaeus, all flows from the incarnation. The atonement is incarnationally understood. Jesus ‘recapitulates’ our human story, obeying at every stage where we, children of Adam – including the adolescent children of Adam – stumble and fall. But such an understanding of atonement carries weight only if obedience at every stage is possible, if, that is, life may be lived in the appropriate harmony with God at every age, whether as toddler or teenager.

The Christian West did not follow Irenaeus. In its understanding of human development its mind was shaped by a far harsher master. To this day our appraisal of young people is conditioned by Augustine’s judgement on adolescence, beginning with his own. The tragic legacy of Augustine is to have burdened the West with his own guilt.

There rose up foggy vapours from my unclean desires and by the bubbling up of my youth, which did obscure and benight my soul so far, that it could not distinguish the beauty of chaste love from the muddy darkness of lust.<sup>5</sup>

And much more of the same. We belong – and never more manifestly than in our adolescence – to one *massa peccati*. The Protestant Reformation might have redrawn the maps by which we may escape from this abject state from which God turns away his face, but it did not significantly challenge or qualify the Augustinian verdict on our plight or on the futility of supposing that there is the possibility for us of a life wholly human and wholly God’s in the maelstrom of adolescence. Both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches continue to understand what it means to be a Christian in terms of what it means to be a Christian adult, and continue to note – and to deplore – what in younger years is missing.

The challenge to the hegemony of the Augustinian judgement on our sorry state comes at last from a voice the Church seeks to silence. ‘Every age, every station in life’, Rousseau declares, ‘has a perfection, a ripeness, of its own.’ ‘We have often heard the phrase “a grown man”,’ Rousseau goes on, ‘but we will consider “a grown child”’.<sup>6</sup> And ‘a grown adolescent’, he might have added. *Émile* is put on the *Index librorum prohibitorum* in the year of its publication (1762) but in

claiming that a human being is no less wholly so at four – or fourteen – Rousseau is only submitting to the logic of the doctrine of the Church that condemns him and of the implications of the third evangelist's commentary on the growing up of Jesus.

It remains to ask what might be the bearing of such an incarnational understanding of human development on the issue of young people's worship. And, because the subject is so contentious, I shall touch briefly the particular question of school worship. I began by reflecting on the dedication of a school chapel to Jesus the Adolescent. In Britain schools are still required by law to assemble daily for worship 'of a broadly Christian character'. Some of those schools have chapels, though few so boldly named as that overlooking Nazareth. In many schools the only space big enough to assemble is a malodorous gymnasium or dining-room. Those compulsory acts of worship are often combined with public admonition about litter and earrings. Can the 'nearly adults' worship God when they are told they must do so and when the context of such mandatory acts of worship is so unhelpful?

That adolescents can worship is not in doubt. For all their uncertainties about themselves and their God, they can worship, and their worship is not impaired if its patterns are not those of the adult. I have argued that an incarnational model of growing up forbids any idea that we are on some kind of 'conveyor belt', bits being bolted on as the years pass until at the end of the assembly line we are finished products. We come from God as finished products, notwithstanding all the growing we have to do and all we have to learn. That is the truth that overwhelms us in contemplation of the new-born child. She, he, is 'all there'.

So too is the teenager, and the implications for how she or he worships are far-reaching. Worship is not the prerogative of adults. Indeed Jesus, not reluctant to shock, suggested that the younger you are the better you are at it. We recall his comment on the raucous acclamations of the children who welcome him in the temple, whose outbursts offend the clergymen present: 'Have you never read, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise"?' (Mt 21:16). This is less an observation on some supposed special spiritual insight peculiar to children than a challenge to the structures of adult power. It is adults who write liturgies, who are the guardians of the holy texts, who control how one talks to God. The praise of children subverts that settled order. So too does the worship of those no longer children but not yet adults, though we do not know whether they too were there in the temple. But if that age also has, in Rousseau's terms, 'a perfection, a ripeness, of its own', then its worship can have its own authenticity and validity.

The essence of young people's worship emerges if we first eliminate what is inessential to it. It is not necessarily highly instructed. Our young people, despite all our strenuous catechetical endeavours, remain blissfully uninformed about much that we see as vital for their spiritual well-being. Our adult anxiety about such ignorance, as we perceive it, is at the root of what is wrong about most collective acts of worship for the young. Such occasions are more often than not masquerades in which moral and religious instruction is presented in ill-fitting liturgical costume. Prayers, readings, hymns – as much as the head-teacher's homily – are chosen or composed to elevate and to improve. The young congregation is being told things. The mode of the occasion is such that the subsequent transition to the lecture about litter is natural and smooth.

Worship with and for the young begins when we forswear our adult compulsion to instruct. There will be other occasions for that, including opportunities for introducing young people to the liturgy of the Church. Young people's worship begins when they are permitted to voice their own hopes and fear, doubts and confusions, joys and sorrows. An incarnational model of worship means that it will be the feelings and, such as it is, the faith that they *now* have that are there and then expressed. The role of the adults facilitating such worship is to provide the space, sometimes perhaps to suggest ways and words, in which what actually matters to those young people can be articulated. We are not there to tell them what the priorities of their heart's desires should be.

The principle of the incarnation is fundamental to an understanding of how young people pray. It is in 'the continuous now' that the spirit within them must answer to the spirit above them. 'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say'<sup>7</sup> is the last word of Shakespeare's profoundest reflection on Christian discipleship, and adolescents above all need that permission, to pray as they feel, not as we think they ought to feel. The Psalter in all its gutsy honesty is the pattern, the 137th Psalm sanctioning prayer for the slaughter of Arsenal.

What we do depends on what we believe. And what we do in worship, what is facilitated and encouraged, depends as much on our belief about the worshippers as about the worship. If our belief about those young worshippers is incarnational we will start where they are, not where we think they should be.

The argument developed in this article has been that an incarnational model of spiritual growth means reclaiming adolescence, like every other stage of life, as potentially a place where the human and divine may engage in unimpaired harmony, and that that model is instructive about young people's worship and prayer. The argument is not intended

to suggest that young people have no concessions or contributions to make to those of other ages in the Christian family. The pattern of the growing up of Jesus must take account too of his obedience to Mary and Joseph of which Luke also speaks (Lk 2:51). The life in relation to God that at every stage will have its own potential perfection will always be life in relation to others. The young in the Church and at school do not have to turn into adults just yet, but they may sometimes have to put up with them. Just as they must, now they are old enough, defer at times to those younger than themselves. Equally there is a grace, and there are gifts, native to the verges of adulthood, and that grace and those gifts are for the good of us all.

To return to the boy growing up in Nazareth. Jesus was once fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Reflection on that fact need not seduce us into a kind of speculation in which the writers of the apocryphal gospels indulged. It can rather focus our attention more firmly on what we really believe about the incarnate Son of God, certainly as effectively as some more conventional spiritual exercises.

For fifteen years I was a school chaplain. There were four boys' boarding houses in the school. As is always so in such communities each boarding house had its own image; it was the popular assumption that in each house, with its own typical house-style and the stamp its housemaster impressed on it, a particular type of boy was most at home. One house won all the games and in it the muscular flourished. In another house, which produced the best exam results, it was no disgrace to be seen reading a book. A third house had a reputation for piety and hosted prayer meetings. There was talk of speaking in tongues after lights-out. The fourth house always seemed to have a disproportionate number of its members in trouble for more or less heinous infringements of school rules. Often we would discuss the question. 'Which of the four houses would a teenage Jesus have been most at home in?' I do not think that it was a frivolous question.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Christmas carol, 'Away in a manger', v2.

<sup>2</sup> Pericope: a short passage or paragraph, especially a portion of scripture read in public worship.

<sup>3</sup> The Christmas carol, 'Once in royal David's city', V3.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Against heresies* II.xxii.4.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* II.1.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1911), p 122.

<sup>7</sup> King Lear V.iii.324.

## With God I am whole . . .

**G**OD IS MY FRIEND, my companion, my guide. God laughs with me, smiles at me, teaches me. Through the good times, God is happy; in the bad times, God comforts me. With God I am never alone, and when others are near, God reaches me through them.

I believe that God works a lot, and *is* a lot, through other people and through circumstances. The story of a person's life is a story of events and people who have shaped that person and led that person into the present. I believe every one of those events and people is a meeting with God. The most difficult thing is to accept this belief when hardships tempt me to doubt.

As well as being everywhere *around* me, God is also *in* me. This is an incredible, and huge, responsibility.

In the prayer of St Teresa we are told that God has no body but ours. It is our task, as Christians, to be like Christ. God is not to be served, but to be imitated. To imitate, there is a need to know God and to know how God would act. This calls for discernment. Thus my search for God, my struggle to get closer to God, is a quest for wisdom in everyday life.

God is in everybody, and God can be seen in everybody. With some people this is easy, while in others God must be sought. That, again, calls for discernment: where *is* God in all these people? God in me looks for God in others, and, when found, is revealed through our actions.

With God I am whole; with God I am at peace. Without God I would be nothing.

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