

On the cusp

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 29 December 2024

A Reflection by Liz Watson

Christmas 1C

Colossians 3: 12-17; Luke 2: 41-52

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I have always been drawn to the expression, ‘*on the cusp*’.

For those less familiar with the expression, a moment’s explanation. When you say something or someone is on the cusp, you mean they are between two states - or are about to move from one state or circumstance to another.

And for those who like a little etymology, the word cusp derives from the Latin “*cuspis*”, meaning a literal high point.

Figuratively, it marks a decisive moment in time, of going one way or the other, a transition from being or doing one thing to being or doing something very different. And the expression also captures something inevitable about that change. There’s no getting around it.

Yes, it can all sound rather exciting or at least hopeful. But it is not always so. Needless to say, at this moment, we stand on the cusp in relation to the movement from one year to another. In a very few days’ time we step from 2024 into the year 2025. But in this case, there’s no getting around it. We can’t turn back.

So, it does suggest a need for a little further reflection before we turn to our readings for this morning. And so, I ask you to reflect for a moment on just how you feel.

I could simply ask you all – “*How do you feel*” and know that I will not hear you all respond loudly and forthrightly: “*I feel like a Tooheys or two*”! Thank God for that. Alcohol will not help us much at this point.

But, nevertheless, I would argue that it is an important question to ask of ourselves,

- as individuals,
- as a church community,
- as a country facing an election early in the New Year,
- as a world community caught up in more upheavals
- and facing more than the usual assortment of unknowns.
- As we take on board the prospect of Donald Trump once again occupying the White House - with a whole assortment of sycophants for company and supposedly as advisers, “*How do you feel?*”

After all our feelings define us, they are us and they propel our actions.

Recently Josephine asked us to consider the powerful emotion of fear.

And in our Advent reflections we focused on hopefulness and our need for hope. *'Where there's hope there is life'* - the Amnesty version of the necessity for hope.

And our emotional state can be one in which we are fired up with exhilaration or enthusiasm or indeed anger, or we may be weighed down with doubt, with exhaustion, or overwhelmed with utter perplexity.

I reiterate that taking stock of ourselves and of where our faith community is right now, as we begin a new year is important. It promises to be a momentous new year for Pitt Street. So, while 'taking stock' is always likely to be useful, it might be judged particularly important right now.

We're on the cusp!!

Let us not linger any longer here but turn to our gospel reading for this Sunday.

This is a year when we make our way through the Gospel according to Luke. And this story relates to the years from childhood to the year when Jesus is twelve years old. It is the only account we have in any gospel of these early years.

First, a quick summary...

This passage from Luke reminds us that Jesus grew up in a pious family that observed the festivals or feasts of their Jewish faith. We start – *"Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover."* This is interesting in that theoretically, it was only Jewish men who were required to go to Jerusalem each year – for Passover, Pentecost, and the Tabernacles. But here Mary and possibly other younger siblings of Jesus also made the pilgrimage. We simply don't know how many of the family went as well.

They would have stayed in Jerusalem for a few days before setting off on their way home to Nazareth. Some distance on in their long journey home, Jesus' parents discover that Jesus is not among them. They would have been travelling in a largish group, all travelling together for safety – too great a chance of falling prey to bandits travelling alone!

But the fact of the group's very size meant it was easier to assume that your adolescent son was with others in the same group rather than still back in Jerusalem. It was when, some distance later they realised he was not with them, that they hurried back to Jerusalem - no doubt worried sick about the safety of their son.

And there he is sitting on the ground within the Temple complex listening to the scholars, the learned teachers, also seated on the ground, and deeply engrossed in discussion with them, raising questions and listening carefully so as to ascertain that he had understood.

We do know that the rabbinical style of teaching at the time made use of questions on the part of students and from that it was the expectation that a robust but respectful discussion would arise. We also know that there was a considerable body of learning among scholars and teachers of Jesus' time. But we also need perhaps to remind ourselves that among the general population, there were very high levels of illiteracy.

Clearly evident here is a picture of a child who is gifted intellectually and who is curious and wanting to know more.

Remember, Luke has already described him as having "*grown in wisdom*". Luke makes use of the Greek word *krataioo*, to become strong, to describe that growth in wisdom. He may well have been wise beyond his years but, like the rest of us, he did not arrive in this world full of insight and understanding of all the things that matter. He was not born omniscient. It would seem he was well aware that he still had much to learn. And he wanted to know more, to get his head around things, to grow in understanding. So, there he was still in the temple.

Not surprisingly Mary (poor old Joseph gets little mention as Jesus' father or in any other role), Mary was not impressed. No doubt greatly relieved to find him safe and sound, she upbraids him. "*Why did you do this to us??*" Jesus simply responds that they must surely have known where he was, "*in my Father's house*".

And after that, Jesus out of respect and no doubt love for his parents, steps into line and goes home to Nazareth with them.

So where does this leave us, here as we are about to step into another year? What are we to make of this rather bland, even dull, certainly matter of fact story from Luke's Gospel? At least one commentary, argued that, after the compelling and wonderful stories of Jesus' birth, and the numerous and somewhat fanciful tales on offer, so to speak, the early church judged that the very drabness, the blandness, of this story weighed strongly in favour of its authenticity.

Interesting, no doubt! However, I do have to say that it rather defeated me. I became blander by the minute, trying to find something important to say about it all. I did not want to "*bore the socks off you all*", so to speak.

Yes, it is a bridging passage or more precisely an account that sets out to fill a "*narrative vacuum*", that attempts to fill in that period between the birth stories, and, perhaps as well the story of the flight into Egypt (if Luke knew of that), and Jesus' adult ministry. Remember that the gospels of Mark and John don't even include a birth narrative, but begin with Jesus as an adult.

There are two exceptions to this total silence. In Mark 6, verse 3, the people in his home town of Nazareth, "*take offence*" at Jesus because everyone knew that he was just a carpenter who was clearly "*too big for his shoes*".

And then, Luke 3:23 says that "*Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.*" And that's it, nothing more. And we know that Luke certainly knew of the many other fanciful stories that, for example, portray the toddler Jesus performing miracles and so on...

One can only assume that Luke was anxious to clear the air, so to speak, and do away with that nonsense. And it is not hard to see the importance of that, especially if we remember the intended audience for this story. And it is probably important in our reflection to take note of the fact that there has grown up, over the years, a conflating of our story here with several other stories in our scriptures, stories in which Jesus sets about teaching the rabbinical scholars. Many a Sunday School lesson may well have unintentionally encouraged such a conflation!!!

At age twelve – no! Searching questions - yes.

At age 12, he is not instructing the rabbinical scholars and teachers.

Later on, much later on, yes, but that was as an adult.

This story in Luke makes that clear.

It is also important I think to remind ourselves that there is much we do not know about Jesus. We do not know what he looked like, is one obvious example. But I think we can also observe that not knowing certain facts of this kind about Jesus seem not to have mattered too much to the early church. I don't think they should worry us too much either.

Luke's story reminds us that Jesus was a normal child who experiences genuine human development – physically, mentally, emotionally, morally, and spiritually - much like the rest of us.

An interesting thought, isn't it. I am acquainted with one rather quaint child who wrote her own book of psalms at age 8. Quaint, but not remarkable. Here in our passage, this genuine humanity and unremarkable boyhood are precisely what the fanciful infancy narratives obscure and deny.

Some commentators also argue that in this passage, Luke foreshadows the growing tension between Jesus' filial identity with God the Father, his emerging messianic consciousness, on the one hand, and his willing obedience to his earthly parents, on the other. He is after all but 12 years old! In Jewish tradition as, indeed, in our own, he is just a boy.

So what's "*the take home message*" from this rather drab story. The emphasis here, I think, is on growth in wisdom. It is certainly that emphasis that strikes me. Wisdom! Now there's a profound and testing concept to wrestle with.

And growth in wisdom! How do we become wiser, and then still wiser. It is certainly not an idea, or concept that suggests standing still, does it. We're going to have to struggle with this one. And it is clearly important that we do. I think I can say without fear of contradiction that there is not a lot of wisdom around right now. We have an abundance of so-called facts, certainly of information, but not of wisdom.

I also believe that we really do not need to embark here on an epistemological discussion about how we are to define or explain this concept, although that would be a particular delight for some of us – a discussion of who decides or makes rulings on what is wise and what is not and on what grounds!

But I do think it is important to register, I think, that at this point in our history we do not believe that real wisdom, important wisdom, as it were, is really only evident in Western society or recent history, or confined to men – heaven forbid! - or to academics and scholars, or to adults. Now there's a thought!

And if you'll indulge me, I will briefly recount a story from my past as a student studying Social Anthropology at the University of Sydney. So long ago!

A lecturer who had undertaken his field work in New Guinea related how there had been an ingoing, bitter sectarian struggle to acquire converts between the missionaries of a Lutheran persuasion and those missionaries from the Catholic 'side', so to speak!

The chief of the local tribe had had enough. He lined the whole village up and went along the line designating each of the villagers – you Lutheran, you Catholic, you Lutheran, you Catholic. The members of the tribe were perfectly content but surprisingly, the missionaries were not. Now where lies the wisdom here?

But back to our scripture story. Our story clearly points to the importance of listening, carefully, and asking questions so as to clarify things. And, perhaps, in all of that, recognising that we must go on searching, always, learning to ask good questions, and then better questions. But never assuming that we will eventually be able to '*pin truth to the wall*', to understand God, to hold God in our grasp.

To conclude, let us remember two particular and important truths.

The first is that if we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will inevitably 'face periods of bewilderment. And if this frightens us, as well it might, we may be tempted to try to find ways of compartmentalising our spiritual lives, trying to hold our relationship with God at a sanitised remove from our actual circumstances'. Those circumstances, for example, that we carry with us into the New Year., even when we'd rather not!

But the American writer and preacher, Debi Thomas reminds us that such efforts will almost certainly leave us with a faith '*that's rigid, inflexible, and stale*'. She quotes the wonderful poet Christian Wiman, who writes in his wonderful memoir:

'Life is not an error, even when it is. That is to say, whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not simply affected by that life, but intimately dependent upon it, for faith in God is, in the deepest sense, faith in life – which means that even the staunchest life is a life of great change. It follows that if you believe at fifty what you believed at fifteen, then you have not lived – or have denied the reality of your life.'

In other words, says Debi Thomas, commenting on Wiman's thoughtful statement, '*it's when our inherited beliefs collide with the messy circumstances of our lives that we go from a two-dimensional faith to one that is vibrant and textured*'.

The second is that we are not alone. Not only does our God journey with us, we travel with others. You lot!! We are part of a community. And we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses from every part of the world and of history.

This is the kind of 'taking stock' that should surely be prompted by our standing on the threshold, on the cusp of a New Year! And it is not easy and gentle and nice. And it will certainly mean that we may need to leave behind, to throw out old habits, as we are traditionally supposed to do on the cusp of the New Year.

But we have not been called to be nice.

I am not suggesting that being nasty is all right.

But we will need grit and perseverance and passion and determination. Yes, it's when we're most passionate that we need most to keep a careful eye on ourselves.

But when you consider what we confront in terms of the climate catastrophe and the bitter conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine and the Sudan and Yemen - and then also factor in our own social problems and political timidity here at home (I think again of our response to refugees and asylum seekers, with horror I might add), it is then that we need to find the resolve to, as the Prophet Amos implores us, "*do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God!*"

And so to a blessing...

As together we step into the New Year,

may Christ our light meet you with many graces

and with the love and the hope that live at the heart of it all.

AMEN