

“THE CHRIST OF THE SILENT YEARS”

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Lk. 2:22, 39-40, 52

If there's anything that catches the eye of even the most casual observer, as he begins a study of the life of Christ, it's that almost nothing is known of nearly thirty of Jesus thirty-three years upon the earth.

There is a fairly extensive report of the circumstances surrounding his birth. But then an almost impenetrable veil drops over him and we are left to speculate upon the happenings of the next three decades.

We do know, of course, that he was a B-O-Y! And that tells us something. A minister friend of mine sent me this announcement of the birth of their third son. Inside is an essay entitled: What is a boy? It goes like this:

“Between the innocence of babyhood and the dignity of manhood we find a delightful creature called the boy. Boys come in assorted sizes, weights and color, but all boys have the same creed: to enjoy every second of every minute of every hour of every day and to protest with noise (their only weapon) when their last minute is finished and the adult male packs them off to bed at night.

Boys are found everywhere -- on top of, underneath, inside of, climbing on, swinging from, running around, or jumping to. Mothers love them, little girls hate them, older sisters and brothers tolerate them, adults ignore them, and heaven protects them. A boy is truth with dirt on its face, beauty with a cut on its finger, wisdom with bubble-gum in its hair, and the hope of the future with a frog in its pocket.

A boy is a composite -- he has the appetite of a horse, the disposition of a sword-swallower, the energy of a pocket-size atomic bomb, the curiosity of a cat, the lungs of a dictator, the imagination of Paul Bunyan, the shyness of a violet, the audacity of a steel trap, the enthusiasm of a firecracker, and when he makes something he has five thumbs on each hand.

Nobody else is so early to rise, or so late to supper. Nobody else gets so much fun out of trees, dogs, and breezes. Nobody else can cram into one pocket a rusty knife, a half-eaten apple, three feet of string, an empty bull Durham sack, two gum drops, six cents, a sling shot, a chunk of unknown substance, and a genuine super-sonic code ring with a secret compartment.

A boy is a magical creature. You can lock him out of your wood shop, but you can't lock him out of you heart. You can get him out of your study, but you can't get him out of your mind. Might as well give up. He is your captor, your jailor, your boss, and your master, a freckled-faced, pint-sized, cat chasing, bundle of noise. And when you come home at night with only the shattered pieces of your hopes and dreams, he can mend them like new with the two magic words -- ‘Hi, Dad!’”

Well, we know that Jesus was a b-o-y. . .and to think of him as anything less than a real boy would be to do him an injustice.

In later years he proved himself to be every inch a M-A-N. . .the kind of man other men could look up to and respect because of his manliness.

Yes, Jesus was a boy. He was “all boy,” in the wholesome, healthy, happy sense of the word. That fact only causes us to understand him better and love him more.

One writer put it this way, “Two thousand years later His name is still the most revered, reviled and debated name in history. Some people hear His voice. Others try to ignore Him, but can’t, any more than Lewis Carroll could when he wrote:

The wisest of the land
Had gathered there, three solemn trysting-days,
For high debate: men stood on either hand
To listen and to gaze.
The aged brows were bent,
Bent to a frown, half thought, and half annoy,
That all their stores of subtlest argument
Were baffled by a boy . . .”

The Silent Years

A moment ago I said his first thirty years were lived in almost complete obscurity. Actually, the gospels limit us to four specific bits of information,

One, that in his childhood, “He grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”

Two, that in his youth he visited the temple where he engaged in a deep conversation with the Rabbis.

Three, that “he was subject to his parents.”

And four, that he “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

Beyond that we know nothing. Oh, there are plenty of legends which the apocryphal writers have handed down. But some of these are almost blasphemous in their absurdity. They add nothing to the glory of the Biblical narrative.

And as one reads the story of Jesus as recorded in the gospels he cannot help but be impressed by the fact that here we have, not the biography of a man called Jesus, but the history of a Savior, the one who came into this world to seek and to save that which was lost.

The Artistry of Giving the Essential Only

Now as some of you know, my hobby is collecting oil paintings. I don't have many of them, but the paintings I do have I love very much. Among the things I have learned since I took up this study, is that the mark of a true artist is measured not by what he puts into his pictures, but by what he leaves out.

The real genius with a brush knows that the secret of communication between himself and those who will some day view his paintings lies in leaving out everything, save that which that is absolutely essential to the story he wants to tell.

And the same must be said of those men of old who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that master of all artistry. For what we have here is not a punctilious report of everything Jesus said and did. (According to John, if that had been done the whole world would scarcely contain the books that would be needed). No, what we have here is a divinely inspired selection of that which is absolutely essential to the telling of the story of the greatest life ever lived.

The Temple Visit

Let me show you what I mean. Only once is the great silence surrounding the hidden years of Jesus' early life broken. And that is the beautiful story of his visit to the temple and his conversation with the Rabbis.

There he confounds the learned doctors with his wisdom and understanding. They are overwhelmed by this twelve-year old boy who asks and answers questions with a depth of maturity far beyond his years. And when his parents come seeking him, anxious because they had feared him lost, he responded to their concerned questioning with the words,

“Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”

These are the first, as a matter of fact, the only words spoken by Jesus during the silent years to be recorded for us by the gospel writers. And yet what more do we need?

Here in one shining, superlative sentence is the story of his entire life. Everything that had happened up till then and everything that was yet to happen during his sojourn upon the earth is included in those eleven words.

With superb artistry the Holy Spirit gives us the bare essentials and because nothing more is needed -- nothing more is given! The veil that had been lifted to give us one unforgettable glimpse of the young lad Jesus -- “(growing) in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” -- is dropped again. And we are left to await the day when the period of his preparation is over and he actively begins the public fulfillment of his Father’s business.

Boyhood Influences

Having said that, let me go on to say that without breaking the sacred silence of scripture there are many factors which Jesus felt during those formative years which are easily discerned.

And it is important that we peer as carefully as we can at those influences which came to play on the boy Jesus, for they had much to do with the shaping of the man.

Someone has written,

“Nobody knows what a boy is worth
The world must wait and see.
For every man in an honored place
Is a boy that used to be.

Nobody knows what a boy is worth,
A boy with his face aglow;
For hidden in his heart there are secrets deep
Not even the wisest know.”

And in addition to his constant communion with his heavenly Father which was an internal thing,

it seems to me that there were five more or less external factors which influenced the Christ of the silent years.

His Home

The first of these was his home. An enormous amount of insight can be gained into Christ's adult behavior by simply examining the nature of family life as it existed during his childhood.

In spite of the many devastating oppressions which descended upon the Jews, they refused to allow anything to weaken or undermine the power and influence of the family unit.

For one thing, the Israelites held their women in high esteem. As the ancient book of Proverbs reminds us, they valued,

“A virtuous woman far above precious jewels.” (Proverbs 31:10).

From their childhood the Jewish maidens were trained to be loyal and loving wives. They were taught the virtues of gentleness, industry, purity, love, and everything we know about Mary, the mother of Jesus, is proof that her whole life was a fulfillment of these high ideals.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Jewish husband and his wife was equally striking,

“If he were her Isaac, she was his Rebecca” (Geikie)

and with loving respect and tenderness he treated her accordingly.

Because of this mutual love between husband and wife there was an inevitable spilling over of reverence for their elders on the part of the children.

From their earliest years the young Hebrews were told how the finger of God himself had written on the tablet of stone, “Honor thy father and thy mother.” And this commandment was repeated again and again throughout the sacred law.

And so, resting upon the highest and holiest of values, the home life of the Jew was, and even now is, a most beautiful thing. And it was in just such an atmosphere that the young lad Jesus was raised.

Douglas Gerrold has said:

“The hand that rocks the cradle rocks the world.”

That was never more true than in the case of Mary.

Endowed with all the spiritual graces, this unique handmaiden of the Lord exercised incredible influence in the development of her wondrous child.

It was at her knee that he learned his first lessons. For it was the practice of those times that education was to begin at home. Long before a child ever went to school or synagogue the history of his nation, the various religious rites and seasons, the importance of the great commandments were drilled into him by his mother.

Nor was this just the duty of the mother, the father also felt a deep obligation to,

“Train up his child in the way that it should go.”

And one need not exercise much imagination to conjure up a beautiful picture of the young boy Jesus listening with rapt attention as Mary and Joseph explained the wondrous meaning of Passover, the day of atonement, and the feast of tabernacles and so on.

Yes, his boyhood home played an important role in the life of Jesus.

From *Joseph* he learned the real meaning of fatherhood so that later on he could naturally and lovingly teach men to call God “Father.”

From *Mary* he learned the history and traditions of his people and the keen value of such virtues as purity, wisdom, gentleness and truth. For no matter how wondrous was his essential nature it was nevertheless still necessary for him to develop character and this he did in his boyhood home.

His Workshop

A second factor that influenced him was his workshop. To me it hardly seems possible to exhaust the significance of the fact that for the first part of his life on earth the Son of God toiled with his hands... doing a carpenter's work. For as Henry Drummond once said,

“A workshop is not a place for making machines so much as a place for making a man.”

And I am convinced that his workshop had a lot to do with the making of Christ's character.

In the magnificent words of Fulton Sheen, “(We) can almost see him at the end of the day of hard labor at the bench, stretching out his arms in exhausted relaxation while the setting sun traced on the opposite wall the shadow of a man on a cross. (And we) can imagine his mother seeing in each nail he drove (into a piece of lumber) the prophecy of a day when men would carpenter to a tree the One who had carpentered the universe.”

Yes, the workshop had an influence on the life of Jesus, for even as he toiled at his bench making yokes and plows and furniture, he was “about his Father's business.” Demonstrating for all time to come the important truth that hard work, whether manual or mental, is sacred when, and if, it is done to the glory and honor of Almighty God.

The Scriptures

Still a third factor that influenced Christ during those formative years was the disciplined study which he was required to make of the scriptures.

We are told in the gospel of John that in later years when Jesus left the villages he began to teach in the great cities, his listeners marveled at his wisdom and grasp of the Old Testament. He did not speak to them as an earnest but illiterate man. The marks of long study were upon him.

When the tempter came to him in the desert, Matthew tells us in chapter four of his gospel, that with a quotation from the scriptures Jesus rebuked Satan, not once but three times.

Now how was that possible? Because the study of the Old Testament was the foundation stone

of all Jewish education. From their early childhood the young Israelites were brought up in the atmosphere of the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Prophets. Jesus was no exception. Long hours of his childhood were spent poring over the sacred page, memorizing it, hiding its truth in his heart. And his frequent use of or reference to the scriptures makes it quite clear that as a boy his young soul had been steeped in the grand old book of his people.

His Rural Environment

A fourth factor which certainly influenced the boyhood and later life of Jesus was the rural setting in which he was raised.

Jesus was a country-bred boy, and while you can take the boy out of the county, you can't take the country out of the boy. And so, on almost every page of the gospels, there is something reminiscent of those youthful years spent in the hills and dales of Galilee.

As Alfred Edersheim suggests in his monumental work on The Life and Times of Jesus,

“On his lonely walks Jesus must have had an eye for the beauty of the lilies of the field. (He must have observed) how the birds in the air reserved their food from an unseen hand, and with what maternal affection the hen gathered her chickens under her wing. (For all of these found their way into his teachings) to him the vocation of the shepherd must have been full of meaning as he led, and fed, and watched his flock, spoke to his sheep with well-known voice, brought them to the fold, or followed, and tenderly carried back, those who had strayed, ever ready to defend them, even at the cost of his own life. He even seems to have watched the habits of the fox in its secret lair.”

Indeed, the rural environment in which he was raised played an important role in the life of Jesus.

On the other hand, Saint Paul, who next to Christ was perhaps the most important person in the New Testament, took his illustrations from the great metropolis. He was city-born and bred and so he made illusions to the sights and sounds that one finds in the swarming streets of a teeming

city. But not so with Jesus. For while he knew the city and was at home in it, he was never able to get away from the beautiful world of Galilee with its verdant valleys, wooded hills and shining sea. His parables and teachings are scented with the sweet scenes of his childhood, scenes which made it easy for a small boy to feel safe and secure in the loving watch care of his heavenly Father.

His Contact With The Common Things of Life

Finally, there were Christ's contacts with life as it really is, and this, too, had great influence on him.

If nature played a part in his development, then human nature did also, for Jesus did not lead a sheltered life.

As a child he played with other children in the marketplace and knew that sometimes kids grow sulky in their play.

As a youth in the carpenter shop he dealt with men who had inherited from many ancestors the oriental keenness for a sharp bargain. He knew the fine line between honesty and dishonesty is hard to discern at times.

As a lad of eighteen, traditions tells us he lost his dad through death. And thus he knew what it means to have the responsibilities of a man placed upon the shoulders of a boy.

He was brought up in the heart of a big family, according to Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. Having four brothers and at least two sisters, he was well aware of the tensions that sometimes develop within a home.

And because of *all* this, in J.B. Phillips translation of John 2:25,

“He did not need anyone to tell him what people were like, *he understood human nature.*”

And yet, and this is the glorious thing about it, knowing us as we really are, he loved us as only God can love us. Loved us enough, in fact to lay down his life for us on a cross.

Conclusion

Thus it was that Jesus lived out his early years. Influenced by his home, his workshop, the scriptures, the rural environment in which he was raised and his contacts with life in the raw. This child of destiny grew, “in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.”

The beauties of life he remembered and later used them to tell people of the love of God. The evils of life he remembered and against these he later fought and worked and preached and died.

As a result it can only be said that from the beginning to the end he was ever and always “about his Father’s business.”

Von Paasen, the brilliant Dutch writer, tells of a faithful sixteenth century Christian who was burned at the stake because of his rebellion against the injustices of Rome. Behind him he left a wife and twelve-year-old boy. When his little heart-broken family came to the place where the charred remains of their loved one still hung to a stake by chains, the mother reached up to the place where the heart had been, tenderly took out a handful of ashes, placed them in a little leather bag and hung them about the boy’s neck. Then she said,

“Wherever you see wrong, injustice, or intolerance, my son, these ashes will beat against your heart as a reminder that you must make them right.”

That was the challenge felt by the young lad Jesus as he stood in the temple that day so long ago. And that is the challenge we must face today, if we are to be worthy of his name. The challenge,

from this moment forth, to be everlastingly about our Father’s business.