

SERMON – 10/1/21
'Fuelling a Warm Community'

Luke 2:41-52

“Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and with people.” (Luke 2:52)

I wonder if you remember what you were doing around this time twelve years ago? Maybe it won't help you that much if I tell you that Gordon Brown was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom or that Alex Salmond was First Minister of Scotland, but given the time of year, maybe it will give you a clue if I told you that George W Bush was about to hand over to Barack Obama as US President. I remember what I was doing because this was the week twelve years ago when I was inducted as minister of Kinross Parish Church. There's a lot of water under the bridge in Scottish and UK and US politics in that time but there's also a lot of water under the bridge in the life of Kinross Parish Church. I have said a sad farewell to a good few brothers and sisters by conducting their funerals but we've also had the pleasure of welcoming new members among us. At the other end of the spectrum, those who were born around the time I arrived here (and I could embarrass a few by naming them) are now at the High School. Some have drifted away from the church in that time while others have come to faith in Christ or have grown in their faith or have taken steps forward in their Christian service. I have always thought of this congregation as a family and that takes us really to the heart of what I have to say this morning.

We will all remember *this* year for a long time to come, and while this particular transfer of power in Washington DC may be remembered for other reasons, the second Covid lockdown which sees me again standing alone to address you on a Sunday morning makes us all stop and take stock again of the nature of our fellowship as a church. It was before we even knew what Covid was that the Kirk Session decided to sign us up as a church along with two dozen other congregations to the Growing Young programme to help us plan for an uncertain future. You will have read about Growing Young in Kin-nections and you will have heard a bit about it through the interviews we did with some of the team members in the weeks before Christmas, but over the next few weeks I'm going to take the six key themes of Growing Young as the subject on Sunday mornings as we reflect on the kind of church we are and on what we *could* be in the

purposes of God as we emerge from lock-down and build for the future. For the avoidance of doubt, this is not only about youth work or about young families, it's about all of us because if we are not growing *young* as a church then the church will simply grow *old* and die.

Those themes are as follows: Empowering the Young, Stepping into Others' Shoes, Taking Jesus' Message Seriously, Fuelling a Warm Community, Prioritising Families, and Being the Best Neighbours. I want to encourage you (if you have not already done so) to complete the online survey – the link is again in this morning's email – because your answers (which are anonymous by the way) will help us to rank those themes into an order of priority. Some weeks ago the seven members of the Growing Young team took the same survey, and the order in which I am taking the themes over the next few weeks is based on how the team ranked them. I decided to start with where we thought our strengths as a church already lie and work towards the areas where we felt we need to develop new strategies. Now you may think differently, which is why it's important that as many of you as possible take part in the survey.

So this morning, we are looking at 'fuelling a warm community'. Of course we are far from perfect as a church, but most people tend to think of the congregation as quite a warm-hearted, a nurturing community where for the most part people find support and encouragement. Now, if that's *not* your experience, we need to hear about it, but if it *is* a fair assessment of Kinross Parish Church, how can we build on what we have ?

You will have heard it said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. That was certainly our experience bringing up our children in a small Borders community – at the weekend or during the school holidays our boys were out from morning till night and we knew they were quite safe; we knew that if they didn't come home at lunchtime it was because someone had fed them and that if we had a houseful of kids at lunchtime it was our turn to feed them. I imagine it was something the same for Mary and Joseph as they travelled with other members of the Nazareth community to Jerusalem each year for the Passover celebrations and it wouldn't have been unusual for them not to have seen their twelve-year-old son Jesus for hours on end while they were on the road.

But you can imagine the parental panic when night began to fall and they discovered that none of their friends or family had seen Jesus since they left

the city. You can imagine their growing terror as the first day of searching blurred into the second and then the third and only then did they find their son in the Temple courts sitting with the Jewish teachers, listening, questioning, discussing, causing amazement to all who witnessed it by the intelligence He displayed. It doesn't take much to imagine the kind of row Jesus got from His parents, who doubtless were simultaneously deeply relieved to have found Him and incandescent with rage at the worry He had put them to. "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" Jesus said. Well, clearly not – even *they* didn't understand what it meant for Him to be God's anointed. Nonetheless we are told that Mary treasured what had happened in her heart, and we are also told that when they got back home Jesus was obedient to His parents – no terrible teens for them, it appears – and that Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and with people.

Now is that not our desire for the wee ones among us, that they grow in body and in wisdom, in favour with God and with people? And I'm not just talking about the children and teens of our church family, I am also thinking about those who are young in the faith, whatever age they may be in body, and also about those who are in need of support physically, emotionally or spiritually. Is this church fellowship an environment in which people can thrive and develop? What does it take to fuel such warmth of community?

In our reading this morning we have been given the good example of Mary and Joseph as parents who brought their children up as part of a community of faith, attending the synagogue week by week and taking part in the annual festivals of their faith. We have seen the unwritten expectation that in that community of faith everyone would keep a look out for everyone else – the fact that Jesus had been left behind in Jerusalem was actually an exceptional thing. And we have also seen the kind of engagement that the teachers had with Jesus and the interest that bystanders took in the spiritual question and answer session they had together.

One of the things that has already been highlighted in our Growing Young discussions has been the need for us to get to know one another better as a church family and really to engage with one another as we understand more about one another's joys and struggles, more indeed about the kind of things that make each of us tick. We have a great deal to learn from one

another across the generations, young from old and old from young, and we need to find ways to facilitate that not only in our after church fellowship but within our services and amongst the different groups that make up the congregation.

That can start right now if we take time to listen to one another's stories of lock-down – what has it been like for those of you who have been shielding, imprisoned and isolated over these last 10 months, what has it been like for those of you whose schooling has been turned upside down, what has it been like for parents juggling work and home-schooling in close quarters, and what has it been like for those who have been on the front line face to face with the virus in some way? What will vaccination mean for those who are getting it next week and for those who will still be at risk in June?

My friends, we all belong to the Christ who walks with us in life, and we belong to Christ *together* which means that we belong to one another. Can I suggest that each one of us takes the time to make contact with someone in the church family that we wouldn't otherwise be in touch with this week and just find out how they are getting on and what you could be praying for them or doing to help them at this time.