

Can saints be matured on a diet of fast food?

I had gone into a large Christian bookshop to buy some books to give as Christmas gifts and just inside the door was a prominent display of suggested purchases for Christmas. The title of the book "10 Minutes A Day with Jesus" grabbed my attention. Next to it was another devotional book probably aimed at women looking for something to give their husbands. It had the title: "The One Year Book Of Devotions For Men On The Go". Now I was intrigued. Both books promised that I could have a Bible reading, think about it and pray, all in about ten to twenty minutes. I picked up the devotional book aimed at men with such a busy life that they had only at best ten minutes in their day for God and had a look. The book was well laid out. The content was generally good. It had some insightful comments on the text which I thought might make good material for sermons or bible studies. It made some thoughtful suggestions about how to apply the text to our daily life. I even considered buying it.

But what these well intentioned books offered, was in the end, inadequate and superficial. No one would advocate that we eat fast food every day as a healthy diet, let alone suggest to a growing teenager that the consumption of fast food will be sufficient for them to mature into a healthy adult. But ten minute devotional books are the equivalent of spiritual fast food. They might be useful for occasional consumption, but are no substitute for a good solid meal of meat and veggies. They suggest, misleadingly, that all we need in life is a quick devotion with God and that this will be enough when it will not be enough. I left the devotional books and went further into the shop to find something else.

My thoughts turned to the topic of a very important but related issue which every Christian faces sooner or later. The issue is whether Christian maturity can be achieved with little effort and quickly, or does it require hard work and a long period of time? The ten minute devotional books give the impression that maturity can be achieved quickly and with little effort – if the idea that we should be maturing is even considered at all. Reading the writings of John Cassian and other Desert Fathers of the fourth century highlight that maturity and how it occurred, was their concern also. Like us, they lived in a period of history undergoing much change in the church; it was riven with doctrinal controversies and sects. Charismatic individuals established new and exciting churches which attracted a large and excitable crowd. What concerned some who were sincerely seeking God like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, was the feeling that nominalism was sapping the church of its life. It was too easy being a Christian now that the Church was a legitimate institution of the Roman Empire.

A comparison between our modern approach to maturing Christians using fast food can be made with reading a story from Luke's gospel ch 2:41-51, when Jesus came as a twelve year old boy with his parents to the temple to celebrate the Passover. Each year his parents made the 120 km journey from Nazareth up the mountain range which divided Palestine in two, and into Jerusalem (Lk 2:41). Unlike today where we have smooth bitumen roads to swiftly convey us to our destination, the road would be windy, and more like a bushwalking track in a national park. Due to the possibility of attack by bandits, pilgrims often travelled in caravans of friends and relatives. On this particular occasion, Jesus remained in Jerusalem while his parents made the return trip home. Perhaps he slipped away from his parents in order to see the temple again, or he might have gone with them to make the sacrifices, and begun to talk with the teachers there and become so preoccupied that he did not notice that his parents were leaving. It does not really matter how it occurred. The result was that his

parents left without him and though he was amongst his friends and relatives. But at the end of the day they could not find him, so his parents returned to Jerusalem and after two days of searching, found him in the precinct of the temple, talking to the teachers of the law, the rabbis. In total, he had been missing three days. Naturally, his parents were frantic and angry when they eventually found him. His reply to his mother's question of why he had not considered that they would be concerned about his safety, reveals to us that already by the age of 12, he was aware of the unique relationship he had to God as Father. His questions and answers to the teachers of the Law also highlighted that he possessed a mature perception of the issues of the Law and the core teaching of the Old Testament. Luke concludes the report with the observation that Jesus increased in wisdom and stature/standing. The people recognised that he was maturing with the result that God and people regarded him with respect and favour. I would like to suggest that within this story, we find the elements God used to mature the adolescent Jesus.

Before looking at the story in more detail, Protestants have traditionally read the gospels from the point of view of following the teachings of Christ. The word 'discipleship' is often used in Evangelical circles to describe the notion that a Christian should model their lives on the words and teachings of Jesus, particularly the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Another approach, taken by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, is a preference to talk about imitating Christ. (This distinction was drawn to my attention by the W. Paul Jones, in his book, "The Art of Spiritual Direction", Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2002), p. 163). It is this latter approach I would like to use to explore the story of Jesus' visit to the temple.

From this story about the 12 year old Jesus, I notice that his maturity was already evident, but was being encouraged by his desire to learn from good teachers. Luke records (vs 46) that when his parents found him, he was sitting among the teachers. As a young person or a disciple, he would literally sit at the feet of the teacher, to receive anything which might be taught. (We also see this posture in Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus while her sister Martha was busy in the kitchen. Lk 10:38-42). It is the posture still adopted in the Near East and amongst Islamic scholars today. Jesus was listening to the teachers and asking questions. This suggests a willingness to learn and not dispute or reject what was being taught, although later on as an adult, he would certainly dispute with the scholars and legal experts about the meaning of the Torah. His questions were designed to clarify and probe the teachers to see if what they offered was mere opinion or solid teaching which he could learn from.

For the Christian today we can emulate his example by finding a mentor who will encourage us and correct us and most of all, teach us by their words and example. Good mentors are men and women who have been through the stuff of life that has tested their faith and put their theology and values through a furnace of testing. They may not exactly be the greatest communicators, and would fall far short of being regarded as orators or skilled teachers in their ability to communicate, but what they do offer is an integrated faith, of theory and practice; daily life and doctrine brought together in their daily life. Their lives speak of God's grace, mercy and tenderness because they have themselves, experienced this first hand. They allow us into their lives because they perceive that we are ready and teachable. Joining a small study or fellowship group in our churches will also help. There we meet people who are not like us and this is good because it helps us to learn that Christian faith is not a matter of just head knowledge and the technicalities of doctrines, but a relational knowledge experienced and learnt in the community of faith. If the church leadership are wise, they will

have appointed someone who is a little further along the road to maturity and able to lead and guide the group.

The reply by Jesus to his mother that she should not be surprised that he was found in his Father's house (Lk 2: 48) highlights another way in which we mature. We mature by spending sustained periods in God's presence. This takes time, effort and the careful pruning away of non-essential things so that time can be devoted to prayer, meditation and contemplation. There is no quick fix method, no express lane to maturity. Old heads cannot be put on young shoulders. Those who wish to be mature in the ways of God must spend time alone with God. (I would attribute this thought to the influence of A. W Tozer, the Christian Missionary Alliance pastor who often emphasized this in his books.)

But what do we mean by Christian maturity? Christian maturity is defined by Colossians 3:12-17 as Christ-like character, Christ like behaviour, Christ like attitudes of love and humility; Christ like habits such as learning and meditating on the words of Scripture and expressing this Christ like mind in songs of joy. (A joyless Christian is not only a sick disciple but an embarrassment for the gospel which means 'good news'. If it is 'good news', it implies that it should be shared with joy.) A mature person takes responsibility for their actions and for the Christian this will be seen in their ability to feed themselves and take responsibility for their own continued growth. The mature Christian does not treat sin lightly. Temptation is not considered a casual thing, but is fought against daily. A mature Christian does not blame others or God when things go wrong but takes responsibility for the responses they might make to the situation and for their feelings of anger, disappointment or sense of injustice. For the young adult, the desire is for freedom; but is a freedom from responsibilities, commitments and restraints. For the mature person, freedom is found by accepting one's responsibility toward our relationships and commitments. It is not an external freedom from something, but an internal offering and emptying of ourselves (cf. the kenosis of Christ in Philippians 2). It is the freedom we discover from obedience to the will of the Father. The mature person finds freedom in our daily relationships and finds in this commitment, the contentment and stability which eludes those who seek freedom from external demands. Maturity is freedom, but a freedom from the inner compulsions, hurts and values we have adopted unconsciously from our family of origin, so that we can express the love of God. This will require a degree of reflection from time to time to identify the points in our life where we are not free to give ourselves to others in trust and acceptance because our hearts hold attitudes and values which imprison us.

A high chair in the kitchen with a parent spooning food into the open mouth of the hungry toddler will not be enough to encourage the child onward toward maturity. We cannot make the assumption that emotional or spiritual maturity will automatically follow physical growth. To encourage the spiritual maturity of our children, or those in the church, our own example is first and foremost, the most important gift which we offer our (spiritual) children. Before we have even begun to teach them, they have been observing us and learning by osmosis, our values, outlook in life (positive or negative) and our emotional responses to situations. Our posture toward God is noted by them approvingly or negatively and formed within them as an attitude toward God, church and religion. The pious lifestyle of Jesus' parents helped nurture his own faith. That they came up to Jerusalem each year for the Passover is an indication of their devotion and regular commitment to the major festivals in the Jewish year. They were not cultural Jews, or once a year Jews, but observant Jews of the

Law and this attitude no doubt helped Jesus mature. A well balanced passion for God is infectious. Conversely, parents who offer lukewarm adherence or grudgingly attend breed indifference and cynicism in their children. Life begets life, especially spiritual life. When children can see that their parents' faith costs something and is willingly given, they take notice. We cannot lead our children any further along the road unless we have first undertaken the journey ourselves. Yet unfortunately, parents regard the development of a personal faith, regular adherence to the precepts and principles of the Christian faith and participating in the public and weekly life of the congregation as an optional extras, something which is undertaken more as a hobby. Time given to cultivating a Christian faith, lifestyle and mind is only given discretionary time as their lifestyle allows. It should not surprise us that their children then grow up indifferent to Christianity and regarding it as irrelevant. One gets the impression that the parents of Jesus were different however and quite committed to following God.

The ability of Jesus to ask questions and dialogue with the teachers in the temple (Lk 2:41-52), highlights the ability of children to be receptive to spiritual truths and their ability to learn theological truth. We often underestimate a child's ability to think, question and formulate theological answers to issues. We may need to adapt the technical language of theology to their level, but children are perceptive. The image of Jesus sitting in the temple with the great teachers of the day highlights the importance of the Sunday School and the youth group in helping the maturing process – if indeed we see the role of these two groups in this way.

The 120 kms journey that Jesus, his brothers and sisters and his parents travelled, was over rough terrain.ⁱ It was a demanding journey; but nevertheless, it was a pilgrimage which was being undertaken. They were going up to Jerusalem to experience the corporate worship of the community and with the expectation of seeing the face of God, at least, an epiphany in the experience of worship, sharing food, wine and dinner conversation together. They were like so many today, who undertake a pilgrimage to sacred sites, be they Iona or to the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral (Spain), expecting transformation through the process of the journey. Others undertake a pilgrimage to secular sites such as Gallipoli, the Western Front war graves of the First World War or trek the Kokoda Track. The meaning of the pilgrimage is not so much the destination, but the interior spiritual journey undertaken which the physical walk enables the pilgrim to focus on. It is for this reason that so many undertake a pilgrimage, both Christian and non-Christian. This too, contributed to the maturity of Christ. Set free from the daily domestic activities and later work demands, he was free to think, reflect, and meet others who would speak into his life. Pilgrimages are not easy to undertake. They involve financial cost, time and physically demand a lot from us. They suggest to me that our Christian lives are often too soft these days and we demand little of ourselves or of those in our churches we want to see mature. Ten minute devotions are incomparable to the sweat of a pilgrim's brow, aching back and over stretched calf muscles.

The question of how do Christians mature needs to be asked out loud, but is rarely done so. It is commonly assumed to be an automatic process, much like the assumption that with physical growth a child will develop emotional and intellectual maturity. By raising the question we are then able to focus on whether our church activities and time are spent on the most appropriate things. The question of maturity and how it occurs should encourage

us to make adjustments to the programs and structures of a congregation and cause us to review them when they are not doing this, because Christian maturity is one of the most important activities for the church. There should be a conscious intentionality in the life of the church which informs the church's calendar, that steps are being made to encourage and provide the opportunity for its members to mature. In contrast, many churches emphasise reaching the lost, 'preaching the gospel' or social justice issues. In doing so they seem to be sending out a boy to do a man's job because their members are lacking maturity. Skills are not enough. A mature character and theology should be required before they are expected to undertake grand exploits for Christ. I think many of those who drop out of the church and leave it hurt, do so, because not enough time has been spent on helping them work through the issues and hurts which we encounter as we mature as Christians. Losing hope, feeling a sense of failure and lacking encouragement, they leave.

For ministers and pastors raised in a church culture that defines their role as a helping professional, or as a motivational speaker and manager of a religious enterprise or as the 'jack of all trades' priest who is busy with parish life, this question will hopefully cause them to stop and reassess their focus, the aims of their ministry and what they dedicate their time to. Too many ministers leak their time and eventually their life, into unfocused activities while their congregations decline and are not matured by the intentional exercise of leadership and focus. We cannot do everything; it's a delusion borne out of a sense of one's guilt of being lazy to think we can; but focusing on maturing the flock is a good priority. The failure to make the maturing of the saints a priority has also meant we have reproduced in the next generation the same characteristics of immaturity: namely pouting Christians who are unhappy that their needs have not been met and obstreperous children demanding that things are changed to suit them (which has the ring of a child demanding that the rules of the game be changed to suit them.)

For the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Cassian and Benedict, Calvin and Luther, William Law and John Wesley and many others, maturity was understood to be the goal of the Christian life. Many of these leaders had well thought out processes that led the immature Christian onwards to maturity. Even within the New Testament we see that the writers had in mind a number of steps which were required to gain maturity (cf 2 Peter 1:4-8.) John offers a threefold definition of the mature Christian [disciple]. They love one another (Jn 13:34-35), they abide in the living presence and life of Christ by obedience to the commands of Christ (Jn 15:5-17), and they continue to hold or adhere to the truths of Jesus which transform their lives and set them free (Jn 8:31-32). The establishment of the catechumate in the post-Apostolic Church and the teaching of a catechism in the post Reformation Churches were part of the intentionality which characterized the Church in its desire to have mature Christians.

It is a distinguishing feature of major religious movements in church history, that the theme of maturity and how it is attained is recovered and given prominence in the life of the Christian. These leaders did express it differently as 'perfection', 'union with Christ, the Beloved'; 'conformity to holiness', or 'entire sanctification', but it was the centrifugal force around which all other Christians doctrines revolved. Within the Spiritual Direction tradition, it seems to have disappeared as a model for listening to and interpreting the life and experience of another person. There is much talk about 'the journey', but not much is said about the destination or what it looks like. Evangelicals focus on conversion through faith in

the gospel, and in doing so, allow the focus of Christian experience to fall predominately on the beginning of the experience. Spiritual Direction tends to focus on the process of transformation; but perhaps we need a recovery of the teleology of Christian faith – maturity.

Fast food devotionals will be insufficient and inappropriate food if we are to survive in a secular world let alone if we are to grow as a Christian. The focus is wrong. The goal of the Christian life is to mature, not just survive. We may recognize the steps taken to reach maturity (which have not been developed in this blog, but others such as Benedict's Rule, ch's 4-7 do offer an outline), but we often forget the time it takes. For Jesus, it was thirty years.

ⁱ (The lack of interest by Luke in recording the existence of his brothers and sisters is due to Luke's focus on the self consciousness of Jesus to recognize the intimate relationship he already had of the Father at such a young age. It is later in Luke 8:19-21 when they are relevant to the teaching of Jesus that they are mentioned. Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55-56 records their names the existence of his sisters.)