

The Boy in the Temple

Hespeler, December 29, 2024 © Scott McAndless – First Sunday after Christmas Day
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26, Psalm 148, Colossians 3:12-17, [Luke 2:41-52](#)

There are certain scenes from the Bible that have been depicted in art over and over again down through the centuries. The crucifixion, the annunciation to Mary, the sacrifice of Isaac are biblical episodes that artists have turned to again and again, seeking to explain and interpret the meaning of these amazing stories through the medium of art.

And one of those scenes that has been depicted like that comes from our reading this morning in the Gospel of Luke. There is something about that idea of the young Jesus talking with the scribes and teachers in the temple that artists just haven't been able to resist. Again and again, they have taken up their brushes to try and show us what they think it looked like.

And so, I went on Google to do a bit of a survey of the history of the depiction of this scene. And I've got to say that I found it all very interesting. So many of the pictures had much in common. But let me show you one picture that stood out to me because it incorporates all of the key elements. It was painted by Ludovico Mazzolino sometime around 1524 in Northern Italy.

Ludovico's Version

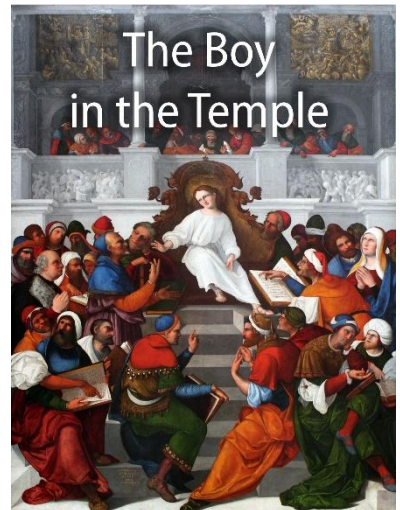
Let me point out a few details that are very common. First of all, and most important of all, your eye is immediately drawn to the central figure, the young boy Jesus. He is dressed in pure white and bathed in light. Everything else is in relative darkness. This Middle Eastern child also looks surprisingly white and European, but of course that is a common feature in most Western art depictions of Jesus!

And then there is the expression on his face. Jesus is perfectly serene. He is clearly self-assured and is making a firm "talk to the hand" gesture towards someone who is arguing with him that seems to say, "You poor man, you don't understand anything, do you?"

The Faces Around Jesus

Meanwhile, look at the expressions on the faces of the people around him. Their faces (which are, by the way, all stereotypically Jewish) reflect only confusion, annoyance and anger. There are, three exceptions, though. On the right of Jesus, we see his parents, Mary and Joseph, approaching. Mary also looks very white and is in an attitude of adoration while Joseph (who I guess is allowed to look Jewish) seems to be staring at Mary trying to figure out what she is thinking.

And then there is another puzzling figure on the left. This balding man also looks European and is in an attitude of pure devotion. Who is he? Well, it turns out that we know exactly who he is. His name is Francesco Caprara and he is the guy who paid



for the painting. I hope he paid well to be immortalized for all time!

But I don't share this picture with you as a lesson in art history. I think it gives us a great deal of insight into how people have read and interpreted this story down through the ages and right up to today. There are all kinds of theological ideas and assumptions that we bring to this story that are reflected in it.

Theological Assumptions

For example, we all know who Jesus is supposed to be – that he is God incarnate. And so, the assumption in this picture seems to be that, even if he is only twelve years old, Jesus already has everything figured out. Nobody needs to teach him anything. He already has all the answers. Most of all, Jesus is literally above everyone else when it comes to understanding.

There are also, to be frank, a few antisemitic assumptions at work in the picture. It sees Judaism as a possibly false religion of anger and confusion that Jesus has come to supplant. The Jewish teachers who appear in the picture are not very attractive. The message seems to be that Christians have all the answers and they understand nothing. The message is Christians good, Jews bad.

And all of those assumptions that are there in that painting are part of the baggage of the Christian faith that many of us still carry with us to this very day. The idea that the Christian faith has somehow superseded the ancient faith of Israel is very common, even though the church officially rejects that as a heretical notion.

He Already Knew

But it is the other assumption that I particularly want to focus in on today – the notion that, when the twelve-year-old Jesus was in the temple, he already knew all of the answers. No one had anything to teach him. In fact, he must have been there to teach the Jewish teachers and set them all straight.

I understand where this kind of thinking comes from, of course. If, as we often confess, Jesus really is, in any sense, God living among us, then surely Jesus came into this world with the full knowledge of, well, everything that God knows. The conclusion, therefore, that nobody could presume to teach Jesus anything seems obvious.

We'll get to the question of whether that is really how Jesus is portrayed in the gospels in a moment, but let us first reflect on how that assumption affects us in our Christian lives.

The Example of Jesus

Jesus, is after all, our perfect example of faith. Because of this, many seem to assume that the supreme proof that they have faith is that they never have doubts. They never question what the Bible says and that no one can change their mind about what they believe. Have you known people like that? I have.

I remember once, when I was quite young coming to what I thought was an amazing realization. I suddenly decided that I knew how to be right all the time. All I had to do was find a quote in the Bible – something that declared a simple truth – and I could know that whenever I said that I would be right.

I Got Wiser

Now, I grew out of that notion fairly quickly. I had not asked if we are even supposed to read the Bible as literally true all the time or if there might be other kinds of truth. I had not considered things like whether words might have had different meanings in their original language and context or whether what the Bible said in one place could be contradicted someplace else.

As I grew older and wiser, I discovered that the more I read the Bible, less I knew for sure. The more I studied, the more I realized that I had to learn. But the thing is that many do not grow out of my early childish assumption. They think that the only way to show that they are people of faith is to never express any doubt or ask any question.

Self-Assured Christians

For them, being a good Christian means that you are always self assured. Like Jesus in the painting, their only response to anything other than what they have already decided is true is, “talk to the hand.”

But all this time I have been talking about how this episode in the Gospel of Luke has been portrayed and what people think it means. I think it might be time to consider what the passage actually says. Does it say that Jesus already had all the answers or that he had gone there to set all the Jews straight? Well, let’s take a look at the text.

What the Text Says

We are told that, when Mary and Joseph left Jerusalem traveling, we must imagine, with a large party from their hometown, they traveled for a whole day without realizing that Jesus wasn’t with them. They then turned around and went back – another whole day of traveling – and searched the entire city for him for three days.

So, Jesus has been missing for five days in the big city. I don’t even want to think of all the horrible things that his parents might have imagined happening to him. And what has he been doing for five days? Well, it seems that he has spent all of that time **“in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”**

He didn’t Have it Figured Out

And that, to be clear, is not what Jesus is pictured doing in my favourite piece of art. The Gospel of Luke doesn’t say that Jesus already had it all figured out. It doesn’t say that he had all the answers and had been busy for five days teaching the Jewish leaders. On the contrary, he seems to have decided that he has a lot to learn and so, on the fifth day, he is still listening and asking questions.

I realize that people might be confused by the next verse where it says, **“And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”** You might take that as saying that Jesus was answering *their* questions because he understood better than any of them.

But the word *“answers”* can also be translated as *“his responses.”* And since Luke has already told us that Jesus was the one asking the questions, what he seems to be saying is that Jesus was

responding to their teachings with questions that were so insightful that they were amazed at his understanding.

Questions

Makes you wonder, doesn't it? What kind of questions was Jesus asking? I mean, I think I could come up with a few.

"When it says the God created light on the first day and the sun, moon and stars on the fourth, where was the light coming from for those first three days? When God stopped the sun in the sky for Joshua why, since the sun doesn't actually move and it only looks that way because the earth is rotating, didn't everyone go flying off the face of the earth due to centripetal force? How on earth does a Twelve-Year-Old child survive for five days in a big city with no food and no place to sleep?"

I mean, those are a few questions that come to my mind but I'm sure that, if everyone was amazed at his understanding, Jesus' questions must have been much more insightful than anything I can come up with. But my point is that you can't ask questions like that without wondering, without expressing a bit of skepticism or doubt. Intelligent questions can only come out of minds that are open enough to consider all possibilities.

God Incarnate

And that means that when we confess that Jesus was God incarnate, whatever that means, there has to be enough space in what we are saying for the twelve-year-old Jesus to not have all the answers – to not have it all figured out and to be in a position where he's truly questioning everything.

And, while that is something that may challenge the way we've always seen Jesus and the Trinity, it also needs to challenge something else. It needs to challenge the ways in which we think of what it means to be faithful Christians.

The notion that many people have that being a good Christian means that you never question and never doubt is very unhelpful. It leads people to suppress things like critical thinking and discussion. It leads them to treat those who express an alternate view or who struggle with teaching as dangerous adversaries when they should be friends and allies. It encourages a kind of Christian life that is defined by judgement and a false air of self-assurance that frankly turns people off.

Christology

The Christian doctrine of the Christ (which is called "Christology" if you ever want to impress people at parties) teaches that, while he was fully divine, Jesus was also fully human. And true humanity does not exist without the experience of questions and doubt and critical thinking. These things make us human.

If you want to follow in the path of Christ, you will not succeed by suppressing what makes you human. That is why I would indeed hold up the story of the young Jesus as an example – not the story as it lives in our imagination and our art, but the way that the story is actually told in the gospel.