

Wednesday after Epiphany I
15 January 2025, Pusey House, Oxford

May I speak these words in the name of God: +Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the season of Epiphany, as we have been reminded several times this week, we mark the various manifestations of Christ's divinity, with his divinity being revealed and made known to us in the coming of the Magi, in his baptism, and in the first miracle at the wedding at Cana.

Reflecting on these, what I found very striking is that these manifestations – extraordinary moments in the story of Christ – almost exclusively take place in the most humble and homely settings. The three kings visited the Christ Child in the simple setting of his birth, while he was but a helpless infant, like all of us at one point completely dependent on his mother for round-the-clock feeding and care. He was baptised, as billions of later Christians would be, like us entering and re-emerging from the waters of baptism. And he went to a wedding and no doubt laughed and smiled and joked around and joined in the festivities with everyone else. We are privy to moments in an extraordinary life, through this glimpse into milestones that very much are ordinary, and familiar to you or I: the occasions of a birth, a baptism, and wedding festivities, occasions which we've all shared in ourselves.

So it is fitting that in Sunday's Gospel reading,¹ we hear of another story that, on the face of it, is a surprisingly *human* one. We hear that at the age of twelve, our Lord went with his parents up to Jerusalem for the Passover. "But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey." Basically, he got separated on the way back. Presumably, the family went with a whole entourage of extended family members, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, acquaintances and other kindred Jews; and in the chaos of that big, loud roving mob of Mediterranean folk, a twelve-year-old Jesus was left behind in Jerusalem, to his parents' horror. It's a tale as old as time, and no doubt conjures up a certain feeling of dread for any parent who has lost a child in a shopping centre.

Truly, this story – the only story of Jesus' childhood we find in the Gospels – is a reminder that our Lord, at no point in his earthly life, was "removed from the ways of common men."² Yes, he was extraordinary to the point that he was found "sitting in the midst of the doctors" in the temple at this young age, occupied with what he says is his "Father's business." So there is no denial of his divinity, only embrace, however no one at this time sees him as divine. But in every other way, he was remarkably human. He was living as a humble child amongst other children; he was bodily feeble; he was vulnerable in the way

¹ Luke 2:41-52.

² Isaac Williams, "Sermon XII. Obedience the Best Sacrifice." in *Sermons on the Epistles and Gospels for the Sundays and Holy Days Throughout the Year, Volume I. Advent to Tuesday in Whitsun Week* (London: Rivingtons, 1875), <https://www.lectionarycentral.com/epiphany1/WilliamsGospel.html>.

that children are vulnerable. In keeping with his earthly station, our Lord kept the law which was prescribed for human beings; he lived in the house of his earthly parents, and St Luke tells us explicitly that he was “subject unto them.” Even though he was deemed fit to sit among the high doctors of the temple, as a twelve-year-old boy he did not go beyond his station or condescend to them: the passage simply says that he sat among them, asking them questions. He is even said to grow, as all humans grow: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.”

But if Christ had to grow from infancy to boyhood and to adulthood, does that mean he was not of “one substance with the Father”? Would not a true god be endowed with all the faculties of a god? Arius thought so; he thought that this meant that the person of Christ could not be one with the Father, and he even used this text to justify his heretical view. But of course, the humanity of Christ is only possible through Christ’s *kenosis*, a self-emptying of himself, which entailed constraints upon his deity.

So his humanity must be real and not merely the appearance of humanity, and his genuine humanity is complemented by a childhood genuinely lived and experienced. This radical self-emptying of himself was a path freely chosen. And this path freely chosen by our Lord was not, as Isaac Williams points out, even a childhood of any opulence or grandeur, the kind of childhood that would have been suited to an aristocrat: “very different from this,” he says, “was the state which our Blessed Saviour chose for Himself; one that differed, it may be, in nothing else from that of ordinary poor children, except in extraordinary piety and goodness.”³

Now, many of us are churchgoing Christians who are probably quite used to hearing this sort of thing, that Christ is fully human and fully divine, but it should not become mere stale doctrine to us. If need be, we should shock ourselves, pinch ourselves, as many times as it takes for us to be in awe of the genuine humanity, held with genuine divinity, of Christ: until we really do believe in what Julian of Norwich called the “homeliness” of God.⁴ For it is truly shocking. Greeks, Romans and others believed in gods who were haughty, who possessed the grandeur that is supposedly befitting of gods, who sat atop mountains and intervened in human affairs when it suited them, when the right sacrifices had been offered. And we believe in a God who is the King of kings and Lord of lords, begotten before all worlds, and not only in this but that this God still cheerfully condescend to us in our condition.

In Greco-Roman times, children had no honour, and yet we believe that our God became a child: “It is a Child set before us,” says Williams, “Words may speak it, but the heart of man cannot comprehend it worthily: that Child is our God.”⁵ That Child is our God. He cares so

³ Williams, “Sermon XII. Obedience the Best Sacrifice.”

⁴ See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter VII.

⁵ Williams, “Sermon XII. Obedience the Best Sacrifice.”

much for humankind that he became human. He cares so much for the poor that he became poor. He cares so much for children that he became a child. And he, who was reared in humble circumstances, who long knew his divine vocation in secret, who grew up in perfect obedience to God the Father and to earthly parents, is the only sufficient sacrifice for our God. Remember those words at our Lord's baptism: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."

From the very beginning of Christ's human life, all human milestones – birth, childhood, baptism – are hallowed, for every occasion and every milestone bears witness to his Godhead. For us, the fact that during his brief sojourn on earth with us, "our Lord passed through and sanctified every stage of human life,"⁶ shows us that ordinary affairs and ordinary lives are worthy of God's concern and God's blessing. The "homely" God is really there present in every homely and humble setting, in drudgery, in suffering, in all human life, because we are his "heirs of immortality intended for heaven."⁷

Amen.

⁶ See John Wesley, "Notes on the Gospel: Luke 2:41-52," <https://www.lectionarycentral.com/epiphany1/Wesleynotes%20Gos.html>.

⁷ Williams, "Sermon XII. Obedience the Best Sacrifice."