

Grown-up Church!

1 Samuel 2^{18-20,26}; Psalm 148; Colossians 3¹²⁻¹⁷; Luke 2^{41-end}

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour
[Luke 2⁵²]

The Church seem preoccupied with statistics and with children.

People remember a time (before sport on a Sunday or computer games) when Sunday schools (usually in the afternoon, thereby allowing time for parents to ensure a further generation would be produced) had hundreds attending and the desire is that we recapture those days. But, with very few exceptions, what the Church offers is hastily conceived and badly delivered.

The Diocese of Birmingham has had as its 'strap-line' for some time, 'Growing Younger' in an attempt to reduce the age profile of Anglican Christians in this city: if we do not succeed in this we can be regarded as 'unsuccessful'.

There are so many options now - perhaps the most popular is 'Messy Church' - and experimenting with the best time to meet other than on a Sunday. Yet, if you have no young people, or very few, it is difficult to focus too much on them and all too often what is on offer is patronising and reinforces the view of society that any child is the centre of their own universe and has to be indulged and entertained rather than trained and encouraged to grow.

In the readings for today we encounter two youngsters:

- ✠ The boy Samuel was an answer to prayer and was given to the Lord as soon as he was weaned. We read today about the annual visit made by his mother and father during which they provided the robes worn by a priest. It says of the boy that he **continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.**
- ✠ Jesus was attending the first Passover after his Bar-mitzvah and was left behind as the family group made their way home. It took a day to discover that he was not with his parents and then three days searching to find him. Whilst the young lad may have impressed the teachers of the law, he had caused his parents some anxiety. Jesus may be the Son of God, but as a

parent I would not have appreciated a child giving a clever answer; **did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?** Yet this text goes on to say of Jesus that he **increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.**

Our task as a Church is to help young people grow, as Samuel and Jesus did, in favour with God and those around them. There are two ways that we can do this:

- ✠ By ensuring that from their earliest years we teach young people how to worship as part of a congregation. We do this best when we are sincere in what we do and we draw young people by example into singing and praying and meeting with God. When I was young the Church was guilty of sending children out because they were a disturbance and the message was clear and heeded: children aren't welcome.
- ✠ By ensuring that we are the sort of Christians that our young people would aspire to be as they grow up. That's what the Epistle inspires us to be: clothed with **compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Forgiving each other**, clothed in **love** and living together in **perfect harmony**, ruled by **the peace of Christ**. People who are **thankful, wise**, with **gratitude in [our] hearts**. A **singing** people because God has put a song in our hearts!

Our challenge isn't to have a statistical return that plays a numbers game, but it is to be a people of God that takes seriously our theological conviction that by baptism a person of any age is a full member of the worshipping community inspiring each other to a vital and vibrant faith that is inspirational.