

Jesus, His Childhood and Youth.

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We know something of Jesus birth from the details recorded for us in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. But we don't know the date! No-one in early church days was interested in a date, as birthday celebrations were considered pagan; the Gospel writers didn't ask Mary which month Jesus was born. But nearly 400 years later John Chrysostom of Antioch did some research using the dates given in Luke - Zechariah was of the order of Abijah, Abijah's order was the eighth of 24 orders to serve for 8 days twice a year. He made enquiries and determined that Zechariah had served in early Oct, so Mary had conceived about 25th March, making Jesus birth 25th December. This he announced to a gathering of the church in Antioch in 386 AD. This has been held as a traditional date ever since.

Recent scholarship has confirmed these as possible dates - Zechariah's week could have been 3-8th Oct 6 BC. Annunciation to Mary 25th March 5 BC, at which time a supernova is recorded by Chinese astronomers. 25th March was also the date already commonly accepted as the date of the crucifixion, which appealed to the scholars of those days - the idea that Jesus had been conceived and was crucified on the same day for the year. If we take these dates as fairly probable then we get the following:

Mary went to stay with Elizabeth from April to June 5 BC. In response to Caesar's decree, Joseph and Mary set out for Bethlehem, between 18th & 21st December, Mary heavily pregnant, and the baby was born on their arrival in Bethlehem on 25th Dec, 5 BC, that same night angels appeared to shepherds who found Jesus in the manger. Mary and Joseph moved into a house, probably staying with relatives, and Jesus was circumcised on 2nd Jan, 4 BC. He was taken to Jerusalem and presented in the temple at the end of January. The arrival of the Magi could have been in February 4 BC, at the time of another nova recorded by astronomers in China.

After the visit of the Magi, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, which he did, and we know how Herod had all children under two in the area around Bethlehem slaughtered. There is no record of this other than in the Bible, but such an event would not have attracted the same attention then as it would today! Perhaps ten or a dozen babies were slaughtered, as the population was quite small. But such horrors do not go unpunished and very shortly after this terrible atrocity, Herod the Great died in excruciating pain of a terrible disease in Mar 4 BC. When news eventually reached Joseph in Egypt, he took Mary and the baby back to Nazareth, where they no doubt had to endure the stigma of Jesus being known to have been conceived out of wedlock.

Nevertheless, Joseph re-established his carpentry business in Nazareth and raised a sizeable family; Joseph and Mary's sons were James, Joseph, Simon and Judas as well as several daughters. Jesus grew up as the eldest brother, with all the responsibilities that that entails. We are going to look at the single incident from his childhood that is recorded for us in scripture. Other apocryphal gospels relate various stories supposed to have happened during Jesus' childhood, but unlike the four Gospel accounts we accept as being God-breathed, inspired by the Spirit, these childhood narratives are just not credible, in the light of who we know Jesus to be. (e.g. Gospel of Thomas has Jesus cursing his school mate who was nasty to him, causing him to drop down dead! cf. Jesus reaction when the disciples want to call fire down on the Samaritans, or refusing to turn stones into bread)

Reading: Luke 2:41-52.

1. Jesus' parents had customs in their worship of God. Every year they made the 4 - 7 days journey to the temple to offer a sin offering at Passover. They probably stayed with relatives in nearby Bethlehem. What spiritual customs have we established in our lives that make an impression in our children's consciousness? Coming every week to worship God? Father's daily quiet time? I have heard it said that "family is more important than church" What will non-Christian family members make of your faith if they can easily dissuade you from attending the worship of God to meet up with them or cook them lunch? And how will our children value meeting with God, if it can be so easily put to one side for other activities? If it doesn't really matter that much to mum and dad, it will not matter at all to your kids. They will grow up considering it to be a chore.

2. Can we imagine this happening in today's society where we have absorbed and engendered in our children 'the fear of strangers'? We live in a world where a 'culture of fear' makes everyone more fearful and anxious of almost everything, while in actuality we have created a world far safer than when I was a child, and yet at eight I would go off on my bike for hours with my friends without a care in the world, when the probability of my being interfered with, abducted, having my bike stolen or being knocked down in suburban London was many times higher than it is today. Yet the way the press handle the very rare incidents of danger to children creates the illusion of paedophiles and child-peddlers lurking behind every lamppost. So rather than teaching our children how to live safely without fear, we dare not let them out of our sight for fear of unspeakable things happening to them. I would commend every parent, Fathers in particular, to do a thorough study in the Bible on FEAR. Most believers are more fearful of people than they are of God, which is the very opposite of what Jesus teaches us. (Matt 10:28)

3. Jesus' remarkable response to his parents was "Didn't you know that I had to be about my Father's business." Gk lit. says: in the (things) of my Father I had to be. Jesus had a massive awareness of 'matters of God', much of which he learned from his parents and from his early schooling in the scriptures. But from a young age he knew God. Don't dismissively say, 'well he was the Son of God'. What of David, what of John the Baptist, full of the Spirit from the womb? How we need to pray for our children that they will know God - this is a billion times more important than getting a good education and being good at sports or music or horse riding or anything else. The best way for children to get to know God is to see that we know God and to want to get to know God like we do. Our children will never "want to be about their heavenly Father's business" if their parents are more concerned about secular work, family, home, sport and entertainment than about being about God's business. So whose business are we about, as we step into 2010? Don't you know how vital it is to be about your Father's business?