**SERMON- On Growth - February 9-2025**

Today’s reading brings us the scene where Jesus disappears from his parents to be subsequently found speaking with the elders in the temple. Luke’s passage narrates how while following the tradition of going to Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus’ temporary disappearance invites us to reflect upon change, and more than change, growth both in wisdom and in faith.

The writers of the Gospel of Luke inform us that Mary and Joseph are doing something part of the ordinary, something that they just did every year: going to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. As they would always do, when the festival is over they return home with their friends and relatives. Then they realise that Jesus is not with them: Imagine you as a parent being in that situation. You probably blame yourself, you probably blame Jesus (his is already 12 and not a young child, he already has some degree of decision-making power). We assume here that this is the first time that this kind of response from Jesus happens. This is a “first time”. Something extraordinary happens: the boy now takes a decision on his own, without consulting his parents. He is braking with a what they as a family had already established as regular. This time he decides that he wants to do something else. Here I think about parents when their kids begin to make their own decisions and they surprise them with something completely new that you as a parent did not expect.

Pieter tells me that when his son Caleb was a child he had a vegetable garden that he started at a very young age. He always would come up with a new technique that he tried on his own; he would plant seeds of all kinds (pomegranates, pumpkins, kiwis, etc.) and he would just see them grow. He would always come up with a new seed and a new interest that always surprised him. As a child, and later as an adult, he participated in agro fest contests at the Markham fair. One of his latest participation, just a bit before the pandemic (already an adult), led him to make a pumpkin grow to the point of reaching a weight of over 600 pounds, which gave him the first place. It was fascinating to see his mind change over time. His interest in vegetables and gardens and seeds morphed into plant science, a master’s degree and a doctorate. In university, it was impressive to Pieter how he discovered the world of grants and how he applied for many of them to the point of graduating debt free. Pieter said, is this my son? Seeing all that brings all kinds of emotions, which may range from fear and surprise to wonder and amazement.

Based on Jesus disappearance (a decision to brake from the regular expected course), they had to return to Jerusalem. Added to the natural surprise and anguish of not seeing their son with them, they also have to break with the regular course of action, recalculate and consciously adapt to the new default: Jesus is not with them, they have to look for him. So, they return to Jerusalem.

When in Jerusalem, they find him in the temple speaking with the elders, interacting, asking them questions and revealing a side of him that they as parents didn’t know. Luke tells us that they were “astonished”. It was like a new person is emerging, a person they did not know is here in front of them. Have you faced a situation when you either see someone with a certain frequency, you stop seeing them for a while and then you see them again and they now sound different? Maybe they sound wiser, or maybe they sound not as wise as you used to hear them before, in the past. They are like a different person. You notice that they have changed.

But, why is it important to examine Jesus’ change? Why should we bother to understand Jesus’ change? Because it provides a glimpse into Jesus’ evolution in knowledge and awareness of his relationship with God while also doing what other teenagers would do, which reflects Jesus’ full participation in human life and experience. Knowing that Jesus was fully human is important because only a God that becomes human understands in their own flesh the struggles of being human. Only a God that becomes human can be in solidarity with us in our suffering. With this in mind, let’s examine Jesus’ change as this reading provides us with a glimpse into Jesu’s transformation as a human being. I invite you to walk with me into Jesus’ growth but as a means to enter into the mystery of God and see that, like Jesus, you and I can also embrace that mystery, and, like Jesus, we all have the potential to become agents of God the father, builders of God’s kingdom, which was Jesus ultimate goal.

"Change" may be understood as the alteration of properties of an object over time. Of all the philosophical traditions to unpack “change”, I want to bring your attention to Aristotle’s. Very loosely I would like to use what I understand as Aristotle’s causes of change to unpack Jesus’ change. Change to Aristotle, “involves the transition from potentiality to actuality”: The piece of marble contains a “potential” statue.

To Aristotle, four elements, or what he called “causes”, are behind change (or growth): the material that composes the changing element, the shape it takes, the external force that impels the change and the motivation to make the change. This means, the marble that makes the chunk of the stone before making the statute, the shape it will take when is transformed, the sculptor itself and the motivation to make the statue, all these are causes. All these are the causes of change, or shall we say, growth (from chunk of marble to the David).

Translated this into Jesus’ change (more specifically growth), the first cause or foundation for change is Jesus’ humanity. We know more about his humanity than his Divinity. We know of his human interactions and that like any of us, he ate, drank, spoke, prayed, slept. We cannot say much about how he processed his divinity or how it contributed to his growth as a rabbi or as a master. But for sure we can say that because of his humanity, he had the conditions to grow. Jesus growth here is of a specific kind, it is into the awareness of the mystery of God his father. How did he do it? Because like us, he had an intellect, he could speak, he could communicate, he asked questions, he listened, he failed, he processed pain, sadness, joy; but also, like us, because he had what I would consider the main characteristic of us human beings: he had dignity. Dignity is the idea that people have value just because they are human. Most likely the awareness of his own dignity, made Jesus aware of other people’s dignity. Over and over in numerous passages across the gospels, Jesus elevates those that are rejected and restores their dignity.

Second, the shape or final “appearance” is also a cause, in Aristotelian terms. This passage shows us a young Jesus engaging with the teachers, listening and asking questions. That fully formed person that we know in the rest of the bible, is indeed formed by doing the hard work, by listening and by asking questions. By engaging the struggles of living a human life. That fully formed Jesus we see throughout the gospels, had to have listened to Mary, to Joseph, to his teachers (or perhaps not listening at all and failing). Most likely, he made mistakes, or even made Mary upset, as the text seems to say. The reading just gives a glimpse into how he learns, but also on how he interacts with his parents, making a decision without consulting them, just like any other teenager would do at some point of their teenage years. To come to this point at a young age, it is likely that he perhaps was a brilliant, curious kid, who most likely started to read the sacred texts at an early age. Jesus is a person who blends divine wisdom with human experience.

Third, like the sculptor (let’s say Michelangelo), with the piece of marble that will become “the David”, external agents also influenced Jesus’ transformation, Jesus’ growth. Here it comes to mind more directly the people he paid attention to: the teachings of Mary, Joseph, the teachers and rabbis; the readings he read, the conversation he had, the changes in nature he paid attention to. He perhaps just curiously observed what was around him and made his own assumptions. Like for all of us, what came through Jesus’ senses and through his intellect transformed his thinking and his way of engaging the people around him and the world. What he smelled, what he saw, what he touched, all those sensorial stimulations influenced his cognitive growth. Independently of whether he was a “child-prodigy”, his experiences of trial and error plus what he listened to and who he listened to, all those also in-formed his wisdom.

Fourth, his motivations to grow, his motivations to learn also are in Aristotle’s perspective a cause of change. The beauty behind the David, the desire for eliciting awe, as mentioned before, are among the motivations of a sculptor. Likewise, in Jesus’ case, we also find specific motivations for growing. The entire collection of Gospels, the letters of Paul and even the expectation of a Messiah coming out of the books in the Old Testament, all speak of the motivations for growth in someone like Jesus. These can be summarized in the message of “fulfilling God’s will”, which Jesus framed as the building of God’s Kingdom. As the heart of Jesus’ message and mission, the building of God’s Kingdom focuses on decentering the human heart from an individualistic posture to acknowledging not only the individual need of love but also the need of engaging in collective living. According to Juval Noah Harari, historian, university professor and best-selling author of “Sapiens” (his first best-seller book), the merging of the stories we create with our capacity to work collectively is what sets us apart from other spices and what has helped us become the species that dominates this planet. Of all the stories we have created, he argues that the ones we must preserve are those that reduce suffering and help people work together. While, as a believer, I disagree with seeing belief as a mere “story”, Harari’s line of thought about how collective living is central for human living, very much aligns with Jesus’ message of building God’s Kingdom.

These four causes of growth happen in the midst of Jesus’ regular living. Growing in faith and awareness of our role as builders of the kingdom happens in the ordinary of our lives, within our families, that at times are broken but at other times are source of consolation and support. We all are on a journey, and we are all called to be aware of the many possibilities around us for growth into the Mystery of God, which requires the humility of being aware of the necessity of God’s grace. The four causes of change or growth that Aristotle outlines provide us with a framework to unpack change in the context of being called to build God’s kingdom. Like Jesus, we are invited to acknowledge the dignity of those around us, to be able to respond to God’s call to love in the sheer humanity of all people. We are called to realize that wherever we are in our lives, we are already equipped to respond to God’s call, to build God’s Kingdom; that we are the repositories of God’s grace and that the people, situations and experiences that we encounter in our day-to-day living are opportunities to meet the Mystery of God and that the hope of a world where, kindness, justice and peace are possible should be the inspiration to engage as co-builders, co-sculptors, of God’s Kingdom.