

Growing pains: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

December 13, 2003

One June my family and I were spending time on the north shore of Galway Bay in the west of Ireland. It was mid-afternoon, and there was a mist on the wind. Our children were playing Frisbee on the shingle beach, and I was taking photographs. I remember pausing as I caught one of them in the camera lens, and thinking, "You are my children, and I love you so much."

I suspect Hannah knew such moments when she came to the temple each year to see her child. There is the tender moment when she fits Samuel with the white robe she brings, each one larger than the last because the boy is growing. In reading of that moment, we ourselves are being called to grow in Christian faith. When we're told that Samuel was "ministering before the Lord," we are being encouraged to develop the art of entering regularly into the presence of God—something perfectly possible for even the busiest Christian, if only he or she is prepared to practice the art in simple ways and for even very short periods of time.

Suddenly the intimacy of this scene is gone and the psalm takes us into infinity. This psalm would make a magnificent video. It would include space shots borrowed from NASA files—Praise the Lord from the heavens! It would ransack the paintings of the Renaissance for majestic winged creatures—Praise him all his angels. The psalm hurls us through the solar system—sun and moon—and on through the galaxy—all you shining stars. We sail on to the great aerial oceans that were once thought to be above the clouds as waters above the heavens.

This is where a 21st-century video might stop, but we cannot. Beyond the deepest heaven and the farthest star, yet closer than our own breathing, lies the ultimate majesty who commanded and thereby created them—the One who fixed their bounds which cannot be passed.

Once again the camera roves. We explore earth itself. We plunge into oceans to encounter sea monsters. We are swept through weather systems and climates—fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind. All are presented to us as fulfilling God's command.

Now we climb mountains and hills. We sweep through groves of fruit trees and cedars. We run with wild animals and cattle, we shrink from creeping things, and we wonder at the grace of flying birds. Suddenly we are in a human environment, its structures ruled by princes. Beyond them are men and women, old and young together. Finally we are deafened by the combined song of all creation, singing not to its own glory but to the glory of God, whose glory is above earth and heaven.

With poetry like this, no wonder the ancients believed that the stars sang. Perhaps they do, and it is our ears that need opening. Perhaps we need to be a people who are close to God.

This is precisely what the Colossians reading is about—the congregation as a people close to God. And we are pulled up short at its very first statement. We are addressed as God’s chosen ones. Ask anyone why he or she is in a congregation and you will get many answers, most linked with some aspect of personal choice. You will almost never hear someone say “Because God chose me.”

There follows a wonderful description of gifts needed to form and hold a Christian congregation, all of them practical and realistic. We might almost call them the commandments of congregational life. Among them . . .

- Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.
- Forgive each other. The word is repeated three times!
- Be thankful. This is utterly central to our lives.
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you. Most of us think of the Word as being in a book, rather than the word of Christ being actually in each of us.
- Teach and admonish one another. Wonderful things can happen when a congregation realizes that many of its members have this gift and ministry.
- Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord.

No aspect of congregational life is outside the realm of the holy scripture that says to us, “I took you to see a child in a manger a few days ago. Today I want you to see how vast the consequences are for your life. Today I showed you another child, a boy named Samuel, growing in a long-ago temple, and suggested that his story calls you to grow spiritually. In a psalm I showed you the cosmos itself to get you to grasp

the glory of the God who gave you the child in the manger. I have just told you what it takes to make a strong and vibrant Christian community, and now I want to show you something deeply significant about our Lord Jesus himself . . .”

He is 12 and has been separated from his parents in a huge city. He has an encounter that changes him forever, teaching him self-awareness and, above all, knowledge of the One whom he will always think of as a loving Father.

In the pattern of Jesus’ growing is the pattern to which each of us is called. Even the irony that he first became lost before he experienced this first growing—even this has meaning for every Christian. We live at a time when it is easy to feel lost. Our time and world are daunting and even defeating. But that very lostness can be the prelude to our personal growing.

May it be so for us all.