

Timing Is Everything (February 2017)

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By Rev Paul Graham

If 2017 goes as fast as 2016, I expect it won't be too long until we're looking back asking "where did all that time go?" It doesn't feel much further back than yesterday than we were at the beginning of 2016 and here we are, already a couple of months into 2017 and not far from Easter...

At the time of writing, we are in the final throes of the January sales, the final commercial act of the Christmas season. During the two months that this magazine covers we will move further away from the birth of Christ into Lent, looking towards the culmination of his mission on earth at Easter and beyond. We move from the child Jesus to the adult in ministry in a few short weeks, with hardly time for our feet to touch the ground. We don't allow ourselves time to dwell on the mystery of the "lost years." Those formative times of adolescence are skated over: the development, education and training that shaped the man who one day put down his carpenter's tools and changed history. And there will be a number of good reasons for this.

For a start, there is such a lack of material to work with. The gospel writers aren't really interested in the youthful Messiah and "This Is Your Life" hadn't been invented in the first century. Mark and John's gospels don't even start until the adult Jesus appears fully-formed, ready for the baptism that will launch him into his earthly ministry. We don't know much about Jesus' early life, except in those brief glimpses of his family trips to Jerusalem (Luke 2:21-52). We read into his knowledge of scripture and prophecy that he spent time at the feet of rabbis. We know that he had family around; his mother and brothers are present at times within the gospels and, even if Jesus didn't always make time to see them, they were there at his death, resurrection and after his ascension.

The calendar doesn't allow for it either; we've acknowledged that there isn't the time if we are to embrace Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and Easter to dwell on "Jesus: the early years". I also wonder if we are wary of admitting too much to the humanity of Jesus as a teenager; did he suffer from spots, were he susceptible to sudden hormonal mood swings, did he suffer from bullying or did he perfect the grunt that stereotypically marks the limits of teenage speech? I wonder if we got bogged down in the minutiae of the complexity of what it means to be a teenager we might find ourselves going down more blind alleys in the divine mystery of someone who is both fully human and fully God. We are too distant from first century puberty to begin to conjecture with any certainty, so it's best to leave it alone.

However, I do think that this gospel-wide silence is instructive. The fact that Jesus didn't start his ministry until he was a full adult in itself speaks volumes. That's not to say that only adults can be used by God in ministry; there are many younger leaders who today are being inspired by God, called by God and it would be wrong for them to delay.

What it teaches us is that even Jesus had to know when it was the right time to begin.

There would have been opportunities for him to start early, particularly after the second visit to Jerusalem where the twelve-year-old Jesus astonished those around him with his wisdom and understanding (Luke 2:47). Young rabbis were not uncommon and he had the perfect platform to launch a youth-led movement.

But Jesus knew differently. He knew that his time was still to come. He knew that he had much to learn and it was in Nazareth not Jerusalem, that he needed to be tutored. For Jesus, not only did he know what he was called to do, but also when to do it.

This teaches us to follow in his footsteps. As members of God's church here in Clare, we are given responsibility not just to discern the mind of Christ, but also to know when to put his plans into action. There is a great quote that says that God's mission is "finding out what God is doing and joining in" and it's one that I quote often (as do many others!). But for the purposes of this article, as a quote it has one major drawback.

It assumes everything is in the present tense: we find out what God is doing now and do it now. This is fine, but there is also the anticipation of God that this quote doesn't take into account. Not only is God doing things now, but he is also going to do things in the future. This is a reassurance as well as a challenge. The challenge is having the wisdom to know what we need to be doing now and what can only be done properly later. The reassurance is that we won't miss God's boat if we don't get on board today; God is the master of scheduling additional transport in the future. But we mustn't get complacent - at some point we need to get on board. Maybe not today's boat, but maybe tomorrow's boat is the one we need to be on.

I'm afraid that this leaves many unanswered questions; I have no formula for you to follow, no "10-step plan for guaranteed successful discernment" to impart. All I have to share is what Jesus had: a confidence that God is doing things and will be doing things and an encouragement for us all to be willing to join in when we can, trusting that we are in the right boat at the right time.