

If you are feeling a little confused by chronology in the readings at this time of year, don't worry – it is confusing! Six days ago it was Christmas, when Jesus was born. Today, aged twelve, he goes with his parents to the temple in Jerusalem. On Tuesday we remember Jesus's Circumcision, which took place eight days after his birth, and next Sunday we celebrate the Epiphany, when the Wise Men visited Jesus who was then about two years old. The following week we will hear about the baptism of Christ, which happened when he was about thirty, and on February 2nd we will observe the feast of Candlemas, when the forty-day-old Jesus was presented in the temple. Christmas, the Circumcision and the Presentation follow the actual timetable, but the other events have been slotted in so that we are ready in good time for the run-up to Lent.

What this sequence does demonstrate is that we know almost nothing at all about Jesus from when he was two until he was thirty, when John baptised him and he started his ministry. As Christianity grew and spread, people wanted to know as much as possible about him, and this absence of information became something of a problem. Surely, if he was such an extraordinary man, he must have been an extraordinary child? Yet none of the gospels tell us anything much at all, although they were all written relatively soon after the events they described, by men who had had first or second-hand access to Jesus himself or to people who had been very close to him.

But you only have to spend a couple of minutes Googling 'childhood of Jesus' to find all sorts of stories. Jesus makes twelve model sparrows out of clay, claps his hands and they fly away. Jesus curses a boy who attacked him and the boy immediately drops dead (or is paralysed). Mary and Joseph remonstrate with him, and Jesus lifts the boy up by his ear and brings him back to life. Jesus is playing with other children on the flat roof of a house when one boy falls off and is killed. Everyone accuses Jesus of pushing him, so Jesus restores the boy to life and asks if he pushed him. The boy says 'No' – well, he would, wouldn't he? Jesus heals a man who has injured his foot with an axe, a boy who has been bitten by a snake and someone who has been poisoned. He stretches wood to the right size when Joseph has cut it too short. He carries water in a handkerchief. He sows one grain of corn and reaps a hundred measures (or, in an Irish version, plants one leek and picks a hundred baskets full).

Why aren't these stories in the Bible? Think about how the gospels, and other early Christian writings, came to be written. The earliest were Paul's letters, and he was not remotely interested in Jesus's childhood. The first gospel was written in about 65AD, at least thirty years after Jesus was crucified. His parents were dead. His brothers and sisters were also dead, or very old. His disciples had probably not known him until he called them to follow him. Even John the Baptist, who might have known Jesus as a boy because they were the same age and were quite closely related, was dead. When Jesus was young, nobody would have thought there was any particular reason to keep records of what he did. He was an ordinary boy; only his parents knew anything different, and at that stage even they had no idea of what was going to happen.

You can imagine how the stories grew. Surely there ought to have been some unusual events? And then somebody's friend had heard something from someone else whose aunt might have lived nearby at the time....and so a variety of legends gradually developed. They are preserved in various documents that were never accepted as part of the Bible because they were too late or too improbable (or both); the 'apocryphal gospels' of Thomas, James and Pseudo-Matthew, an Arabic text and a set of Irish verses, dating variously from the second to the eighth centuries.

There are apocryphal legends about Mary too; she also was so special and important that her childhood must also have been extraordinary.

There is just one incident that involved other people and would have made an impression on them at the time, and that is the one described in today's gospel. The Holy Family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, taking the twelve-year-old Jesus with them. Maybe it was time for his Bar mitzvah – the ceremony where a Jewish boy is recognised as an adult member of the congregation. If so, he would certainly have encountered some of the temple priests. On the way back, Mary and Joseph discovered that he was missing. They asked around, and he wasn't with any of the others in the party – so people would have remembered that he was lost. Eventually they found him in the temple with the teachers, who were amazed at his learning – and so would remember him later. The other travellers would certainly have asked where Jesus had been found, and would remember that too. Here we have two independent sets of witnesses, and an account written well before the end of the first century, when there could still have been first-hand evidence to draw on.

There is a natural tendency to want Jesus's childhood to be extraordinary. But the fact of the incarnation meant that he was fully a human being, and so must have been just like any other small boy. He would have toddled around and fallen over, played, learned to read and write (which we know because later he read from the synagogue scroll and wrote in the dust), gone with his parents to synagogue and taken part in worship, and probably helped his father in the carpenter's workshop. He would have had to earn his keep for at least fifteen years before starting his ministry. The reason we know about his staying behind in the temple is because it stood out so starkly from what must have been an otherwise unremarkable childhood. 'Day by day, like us, he grew.' While Mary pondered what she had seen and heard in her heart, Jesus grew to maturity, until one day he went down to the river Jordan and was baptised by John. The rest, as they say, is history – real history.