

Commit to an inclusive, open, creative community

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Christmas 1C – 1 Sam 1, Ps 148, Col 3 12-17, Lk 2 41-52

It's been a very busy week in the Church calendar. Wednesday was Christmas, of course, and you'd think that was plenty for one week. But the next day was the feast of Stephen, that feisty new deacon who preached such a confronting sermon that his listeners killed him for it, making him the Church's first martyr. Then Friday was the feast of our patron saint, John, Apostle and Evangelist. And yesterday was Holy Innocents' Day – recalling all the babies in Bethlehem that Herod ordered to be massacred in the hope that Jesus would be one of them.

In our time, where that same sort of intolerance and violence is such a real threat in so much of the world, the Church still has to confront much that is wrong. And our faith needs to be mature enough and articulate enough to confront it both effectively and transformingly. We have to be able to call out intolerance and violence with integrity. And we need to convince so many people to resist it with us, that vulnerable people are given real hope for change. We're called to embody and proclaim a robust message of peace and justice. ... But I'm not confident that the Church in our type of country is up to this; nor confident that we're conscious it's part of our job description.

That's why, in my weekly, on St John's day, I asked the question, *What do you think St John would want this parish to be when we grow up?* It's helpful that two of today's readings have us subconsciously asking the same question about the young boys we met in them. We just spent some time with the little boy Samuel whose mother left him, dedicated to God's

service in the shrine at Shiloh with Eli the priest. We also read about Jesus failing to join his family on their journey home from Passover in Jerusalem. Instead, for three days, he sat in on the theological debates of the Temple teachers, astounding them with his understanding and his answers. *What on earth were these boys going to be when they grow up?* What would you predict from the information we've got before us today? Damaged delinquents? No. Luckily, we know what follows.

Sometimes when you do a self-development course, the facilitator will give you a task of mapping out the highs and lows of your life or your occupation. We're meant to think about the ways those highs and lows have shaped the way we've turned out. I'm not sure Samuel would have given a high watermark to the day his mother delivered him to God's service at Shiloh, pretty well as soon as he was weaned. Yet he grew up to be an extraordinarily feisty, courageous prophet who confronted kings and crowds. He could recall a nation to their duty to God and to each other, and get away with it.

And what about Jesus – would he have marked his three days debating in the Temple as a high point?

I've sat in on a Rabbi preparing young people for their transition to adulthood and it's no picnic. The give and take is something that makes parliamentary question time look pretty tame. It's part of forming young people into adults who can truly give an account of their convictions. The only convincing parallels I've experienced in the Anglican Communion are in the Church of South India and in Mandarin congregations. But our culture tends towards a softly, softly approach. And we don't have young people being presented here for spiritual formation at the moment anyway.

So the question remains for us: *What do you think our patron St John would want this parish to be when we grow up?* If he asked us to map the highs and lows of our parish's 185 odd years of existence, there'd be many. But for the moment, I

think of something from our more recent history. Fr Don Wallace opened up the rectory and the hall to homeless boys back in the '60s and '70s. It wasn't without its hiccups! It led to the building of the shelter in the 1980's and the growth of St John's Youth Services, now forming about 70 young people in apartments in the city, and the foyer at Port Adelaide.

Fr Don is still remembered about the district doorknocking in his black cassock to raise funds to keep the parish afloat. And yet, moved by compassion, he took the risk he did with the homeless boys. And not just through the church. Around 1960, he and his first wife Gwen adopted 12-year-old Harold Thomas into their family when St Francis' House at Semaphore closed. We still have the table in the dining room where Harold designed the Aboriginal flag. Our parish history says the SSM arrived and 'saved the parish' from closure. But look at what was achieved when we were on our knees!

Some people are still here who remember this, but most of us are latecomers, and so the question is a new one for us. *What do you think our patron St John would want this parish to be when we grow up?* Samuel was dedicated to God's service before he was even conceived. And twelve-year-old Jesus stunned his parents with his declaration of God's prior call on his time. What's it to be with you and me – with St John's?

Our collect prayer says God is 'God of community'. God's community is one which embraces – it doesn't exclude. That's why the Psalm has us calling the whole creation into communion with God. That's why the reading from Colossians is so focussed on the empathic, welcoming, forgiving choices and decisions we need to make to treat another person with respect. Because that's what it takes to build a transforming, Christlike community. We Christians are called to grow into outward-looking people who can bring the peace of God to the world. We are to commit to inclusive, open, creative community. We're called to have open borders with wonderful

gifts to share and receive, and a genuine desire to do just that. *What do you think our patron St John would want this parish to be when we grow up?* Amen.