

# HUNGER FOR CHANGE

## Learning for Life

### Biblical Reflection

By John Prociuk

Luke 2:39-52

<sup>39</sup> When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup>The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

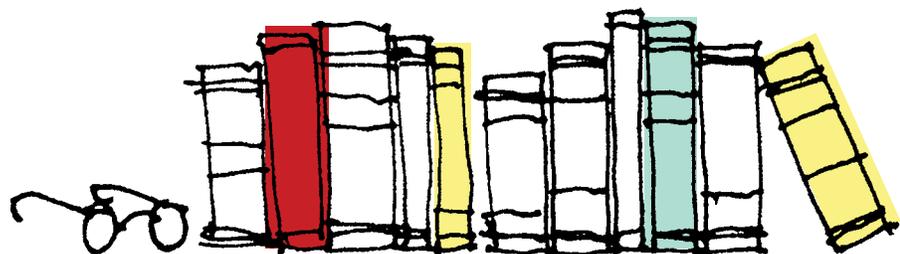
<sup>41</sup>Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup>And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup>When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

<sup>44</sup>Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. <sup>45</sup>When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. <sup>46</sup>After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup>And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

<sup>48</sup>When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." <sup>49</sup>He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup>But they did not understand what he said to them.

<sup>51</sup>Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup>And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10



It is easy to smile when picturing Jesus as a precocious boy of twelve, debating scholars in the temple. Preachers tell us this story displays early evidence of his divine nature. However, the passage is more than just a charming vignette with a bit of truth value—it also speaks to the importance of education, and the challenges faced by many children today.

## **Created for Fullness of Life**

Like most children, learning was part of Jesus' development. Education was central to his growth in maturity, his growth in "wisdom and stature."

The details are familiar. While returning to their hometown from the annual feast of Passover, Mary and Joseph realized their son was no longer with them. Racing back to Jerusalem, they found Jesus "in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." In the standard rabbinical teaching method, students sat on the ground in front of seated rabbis. Questions were asked, discussion followed. Here we imagine the intense boy of twelve – on the brink of manhood – listening, asking probing and insightful questions, and exhibiting a level of understanding that amazed everyone who heard him.

Every child who comes into the world is created in the image and likeness of God. Children may differ in core intelligence, aptitude and potential; are influenced by cultural, social and religious customs; and are certainly affected by economic capacity. However, every child is born to learn and grow – like Jesus himself. Jesus' promise to bring fullness of life extends to all children.

Education is crucial to this fullness, and it means more than simply acquiring vocational skills and preparing people for employability and employment. Education carries intrinsic value – it is crucial to self-confidence, well-being, and personal and emotional resilience and adaptability.

This is God's dream for every child, including Jesus himself. The glory of God is a human being fully alive!

## **Breaking Barriers**

Today's global reality is that millions of children will never receive the life-changing gift of education. At an historic summit in 2000, leaders of 189 nations developed eight Millennium Development Goals, including one to "achieve universal primary education" by 2015. Although some progress has been made, over 100 million children are still denied basic schooling today. Poverty is the most common reason. For families struggling to survive, educating children is a luxury they cannot afford. What's more, over two-thirds of uneducated children are girls. In poor families with multiple children, boys often have priority over girls in receiving an education. Uneducated girls find themselves at higher risk to become marginalized and exploited. They are more likely to contract HIV or die during childbirth. It is also less likely they will ever own land, have a say in society, or break out of the cycle of poverty. Whether we think of children orphaned by HIV and AIDS in Kenya, those with imprisoned parents in Bolivia, or many who are forced into child labour in India, barriers to education at times appear impenetrable.

There were barriers in Jesus' day. He was born into what was essentially a two-class society. The upper class represented only about 10 percent of the population – these included chief priests, elders, military leaders, aristocracy and, of course, political leaders like King Herod.

The lower class, about 90 percent of the population, were peasants. Employed peasants included agricultural workers, day labourers, construction workers, fishermen, and slaves or servants. The unemployed – the homeless, lame, blind and diseased (who were also labeled as spiritually unclean) – were radically poor. These had no hope of education.

Jesus was from the peasant class, from the small rural village of Nazareth, whose residents lived in simple homes – a stark contrast to Herod's mansions and the temple courts of Jerusalem. His father Joseph was a tekton or "handyman," who probably specialized in stonecutting, carpentry and general manual labour. His son would follow in his father's vocation.

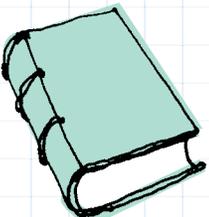
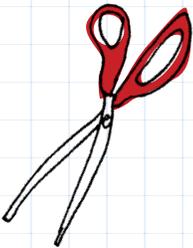
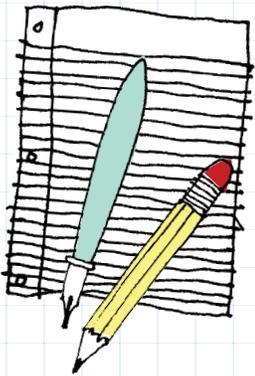
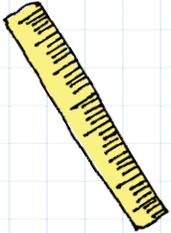
As part of the peasant class, Jesus' education would have taken place in the home and synagogue, under the local rabbi. Jewish boys began to learn to read and write at the age of five, and at 10 they would begin to learn Jewish law. Yet it was only privileged young men from the upper class who could afford advanced education, pursuing the career of scribe or doctor of the law. This was clearly not Jesus' career track. Convention dictated that he would be a carpenter for life, paying high taxes to Rome and obeying the cultural and religious expectations of someone in his social circle.

Yet at the tender age of 12, Jesus took it upon himself to break through the barriers of his class, staying behind in Jerusalem to learn at the feet of the temple scholars. What prompted him to do so? Perhaps in learning about the Passover and the story of the deliverance of his people from Egypt, he became aware of those who were denied advancement. Certainly the story of how Moses confronted the Pharaoh to "let my people go" hundreds of years earlier was fresh in his young mind and heart during the Passover days. Maybe that is what he meant when he told his mother that he was "going about his Father's business" – as he learned, Jesus began to resonate with the call to be the new Moses.

Jesus had barriers to overcome. He responded to the understandable scolding from his parents, "Why have you treated us like this?" with the response, "Why were you searching for me?" Years later, people would scratch their heads and ask: "Is this not Joseph's son?" Is this not a small-town carpenter? All the while, the boy from Nazareth learned and grew to lead his people to freedom.

Education is symbolic of freedom. Education is development. It is central to God's dream of breaking intergenerational cycles of dependency, inequality and low self-worth. It creates choices and opportunities for people, reduces the twin burdens of poverty and disease, and strengthens needed voices in society. For nations, it creates a dynamic workforce and well-informed citizens able to compete and cooperate globally – opening doors to economic and social prosperity. The lack of opportunity for education is a modern expression of slavery.

Slavery is entrenched through wealth imbalance and demands of class. It can be justified by the attitudes of loved ones and strangers, friends and enemies. It is reinforced by clever political might and cultural stereotypes. It is powered by the deeper, sinister forces of greed and indifference. One out of seven children is still denied basic education in our world today. Who will come to their support? Who will follow Jesus?



## A Challenge to Those Who Follow Christ

Jesus was not a shy boy, neither was he without means. As Son of God, he broke through the barriers of class, economics and social status to learn what he needed to know. Jesus did not require a privileged family name, the leverage of strong friends, or the charity of a benefactor. Considering this, we find ourselves at the centre of the problem, because no child today can claim the nature and calling of Christ. Yet in the very place of the problem lies the solution – the God of freedom continues to act in places of need, through those who follow the way of Jesus in the world.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell has exposed the myth that accomplished people rise to prominence on the basis of their own individual skill and grit. Without diminishing the importance of timing, talent and tenacity, Gladwell found that successful people reach their state of success within a circle of people that provides support and opportunity.

Children today need others to speak for them with the voice of Jesus. They need strong friends who make real the promise of fullness of life announced by Christ. Jesus promises to accompany his people and provide spiritual strength to break invisible strongholds, but children need you and me to be the difference-makers, believing in God's dream for every child and making it real through our courage and generosity.

