

Jesus Loves to Use Youth in His Ministry

By Anand Peter

Youth is the time of life when one is young — often described as the span between childhood and adulthood, and marked, too, by the freshness, vigour, and spirit characteristic of one who is young. Most definitions of youth, however, resist being tied to any specific range of years, since youth is not truly a matter of chronology, and its end cannot be fixed by any one event, such as taking up employment or marrying. I prefer to think of it as an experience that shapes a person's maturity — emotional, spiritual, moral, and intellectual — an experience marked differently across different cultures.

Though I am an elder, I do not intend to pour out wisdom, telling youth what they should or should not do. Instead, I find myself travelling back, in my mind, over five decades of my own life, to plead the cause of youth. My point, quite simply, is that youth can be good leaders precisely as they are, and that God has always used them, and continues to use them, in the economy of His Kingdom. Read on.

It is often thought that the youth of today are merely the leaders of tomorrow. But Scripture never places youth in such a category. It never instructs the young to wait until they are more mature, more knowledgeable, or more skilled before they begin to take God's Word seriously, and to consider what plans and purposes the Lord has for their lives. According to God's Word, young people are to be leaders even as they are, earnestly desiring to honour and serve our Lord in all their thoughts and actions. Paul told Timothy, a younger man in the faith, "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). Christian youth need to understand God's instruction to them, and let the world watch them grow in their spiritual walk with the Lord.

Sadly, many young people feel as though God will only use them, or speak to them, once they grow older. Yet this is certainly not true. Directly, or in more subtle ways, this is often what older people would have our youth believe. I would argue that many adults do not always provide the right example for anyone to follow, let alone the young. Some are downright hypocritical; others seem not to care at all what God's Word has to say. Today, as many older believers set aside the teaching of God's Word in order to be accepted by others, or to hold positions of power, or to be caught up in the pursuit of wealth, those who are younger are watching this tragic compromise unfold — this disregard for Biblical truth, and this drift away from the will of Jesus Christ. While it may be hard to find a role model among the older generation of believers, the younger generation can take their place, and lead others toward the Kingdom of Jesus.

How, then, should we approach this subject? A good way is to look briefly at the lives of some of the young people of the Bible, who led by their own actions and example. I would urge you to read of them yourself, for a deeper understanding than time allows here.

Joseph is truly one of the finest characters of the Old Testament. He was his father's favourite, and for that his envious brothers sold him into slavery, so that he was carried down to Egypt. One of the most

striking features of his story is that he was only seventeen years of age at the time — a young man, in a strange land, cut off from his people and from the centre of his faith, and yet unwaveringly faithful to his God.

Miriam, his elder sister, thought to have been about ten or twelve years old at the time the infant Moses was set afloat upon the Nile, was posted some distance away to keep watch over him. It was Miriam who arranged, in the end, for Moses' own mother to become his nurse — a striking providence of God.

The story of David, who became Israel's king, is too well known to need retelling. Who among us, child or adult, has not been thrilled by the account of David's encounter with the fearsome Goliath? Here, too, we find the Lord investing in youth, and truth triumphing because of it.

Josiah was but a boy of eight when he came to the throne. At sixteen, he began to seek the LORD in earnest, and by twenty he had begun a campaign to purge the southern kingdom of its idolatry (2 Chronicles 34:1-3). At twenty-six, he arranged for the repair of the Temple, and it was during these repairs that a copy of the Law of the LORD, given through Moses, was discovered (2 Chronicles 34:14).

Jeremiah, the great young "weeping prophet," is one of the most remarkable figures of the Old Testament, labouring desperately to bring a rebellious Judah back into conformity with the law of God — a preaching career that may have spanned sixty years or more.

One can only imagine how remarkable the young Mary of Nazareth must have been, chosen as she was, of all the women of Israel, to be the mother of our Lord; it is entirely possible that she was still in her early teenage years when she bore the Saviour of the world. What does this not say of how God trusts the spiritually minded young?

There was no companion closer to the great Apostle Paul than his young friend Timothy. Writing to the church at Philippi, a congregation for whom he held great affection, Paul pledged to send Timothy to them, paying him the highest of compliments: "For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state" (Philippians 2:20).

These are but a few of the examples that stand out in Scripture; the life of each one holds great lessons for our youth, and indeed for all of us. What follows is a pattern of practical Christian living, drawn together from them:

1. Be a good example to other young people. As a Christian, you should lead by example, following Christian teaching in all you do, so that everything in your life reflects the goodness of God.
2. Be patient and kind. If people cannot tell that you are a Christian from your actions and your words, something has gone amiss; live, every single day, with the right attitude.
3. Reach out to those whom others shun. Jesus showed love to people treated with contempt, or regarded as of little worth, by the society around Him. Never give up on anyone, and never give up on God, whether in good times or in bad.
4. Learn to bear rejection or loss with grace. It is easy to feel glad about the good you do; it is harder to keep a right attitude when you meet with rejection or negativity.
5. Keep studying your faith, and continue to do so as you grow older.
6. Read the Bible. Try, if you can, to read a portion of Scripture

each day, since God's word provides the guidance a Christian life needs; listen, too, to the wisdom of your elders. 7. Pray as often as you are able, and attend church faithfully. You need only say, in your own words, "God, I do not know what to do, but I have this desire in my heart to make a difference." God does not mind how you speak to Him; He delights simply to hear from you. 8. Lead, or take part in, a fundraiser for someone in need — even if you begin only by collecting spare change, or giving what you have to a worthy cause. 9. Join a youth group, or a mission. This is a further way of giving back, through the group activities of your church; take part in mission trips, whether abroad or at home, and if your own church has none, bring the idea to your congregation. 10. Be open about your faith and your principles. This may, at times, be difficult, and you may feel yourself the only young Christian willing to speak of it openly; stand your ground, and actively grow your relationship with Christ. 11. Give back by volunteering your time — helping the homeless, caring for the elderly or the disabled, or serving at your church, your school, or in your own home. 12. Share your faith where it may help another. This does not mean pressing your beliefs upon anyone; but if someone asks what keeps you strong, tell them, gently, that you believe in God, and that you place your worries, your fears, and your pain in His hands, so that you might help others do the same with theirs.

To the older generation, I would say this: youth can accomplish magnificent things for the cause of Jesus, if only we recognise it. Are our young people too often dismissed as empty-headed and unworthy of serious responsibility? Sadly, this may sometimes be so. But we must not overlook this precious resource for the ministry of Jesus; we must watch for it, and encourage it, wherever we find it, for God can use young people mightily.

And to our youth, I would say: never give up. When you fail the Lord, in whatever way — and we shall all fail Him, at some time or another — return to Him through prayer and the study of Scripture, and purpose again to please Him in all you do. Keep striving to be an example to others, Christian and otherwise. Jesus Christ earnestly desires to help you, to walk with you, and to strengthen you in every part of your life; all that is asked of you is to obey Him, and to yield yourself to Him and to His will. Difficult days will come — loneliness, anxiety, the pressure of your peers, and discouragement will look you in the eye — but God remains faithful to us all. Whatever comes, be prepared to remain faithful to Him. Amen.