

Column

The other day I received an email from a friend in Florida. Attached was a picture of her grandson who now stands 5 feet 9 inches tall. I immediately wrote back asking: “What happened to the little boy I ran along the beach with in the rain so he could see the lighthouse on Key Biscayne?” She shot back: “They grow up!”

She is right, of course. They do grow up, though the rate at which this happens, at times, seems a bit overwhelming. If they did not, if growth was arrested, there would be real cause for concern.

The same is true spiritually. We are born anew into the kingdom of God as babes in Christ. That is right and beautiful, yet God does not intend us to remain spiritual babies.

Growth in knowledge, growth in understanding, growth in faith and love are all part of God’s plan. Even so, this growth does not always come. Some seem content to remain spiritual pygmies, and this is very sad.

One area of growth I have just mentioned is in the area of understanding. This kind of growth often means passing through various “heresies.” By heresies I mean inadequate or incomplete views of God.

To use myself as an example – when I was about six, I remarked to a Sunday school teacher that Jesus did not feel any pain when He hung on the cross. She asked me to explain how I had come to such a conclusion. My reasoning went something like this: Jesus is God; God is all-powerful; therefore, Jesus could elect not to feel any pain.

This teacher wisely took time to explain that while Jesus was indeed “very God of very God,” He was also “very man of very man”. In other words, prick Him with a pin, and He would bleed.

Her wise words prepared me later to take in words found in the Thirty-Nine-Articles of Religion: “The two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided . . . Christ truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried.”

Growth involves stretching our minds, giving time and thought to the things of God, weighing and putting into practice those things we find in Holy Writ. It requires the discipline of a soldier, the perseverance of an athlete and the hard work of a farmer.

So far, I have talked about spiritual growth as if it were solely a human endeavour. This is a part-truth. A mother cares lovingly for her infant. She sees all his needs are met, but she is powerless to make him grow. The same is true in the spiritual realm. It is God who gives the increase.

Jesus explained this mystery using imagery from the plant kingdom when he said: “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine: no more can ye, except ye abide in me . . . without me ye can do nothing.”

Growth, then, is a two-sided coin. On the human side, there is hard work; on the divine there is help.

What is your height on the spiritual growth chart?

Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.