

CHRISTUS VIVIT: Youth and Scripture



To help schools' journey through *The Year of the Word; The God Who Speaks* we've taken excerpts from Papal texts concerning young people and scripture. The excerpt below comes from *Christus Vivit (Christ is Alive)*, a post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, written in response to the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on young people, faith and vocational discernment, October 2018. The full document can be downloaded at www.vatican.va

CHAPTER ONE

What does the word of God have to say about young people?

5. Let us draw upon some of the richness of the sacred Scriptures, since they often speak of young people and of how the Lord draws near to encounter them.

In the Old Testament

6. In an age when young people were not highly regarded, some texts show that God sees them differently. Joseph, for example, was one of the youngest of his family (cf. Gen 37:2-3), yet God showed him great things in dreams and when about twenty years old he outshone all his brothers in important affairs (cf. Gen 37-47).

7. In Gideon, we see the frankness of young people, who are not used to sugar-coating reality. When told that the Lord was with him, he responded: "But if the Lord is with us, why then have all these things happened to us?" (Jg 6:13). God was not offended by that reproach, but went on to order him: "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel!" (Jg 6:14).

8. Samuel was still a young boy, yet the Lord spoke to him. Thanks to the advice of an adult, he opened his heart to hear God's call: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:9-10). As a result, he became a great prophet who intervened at critical moments in the history of his country. King Saul was also young when the Lord called him to undertake his mission (cf. 1 Sam 9:2).

9. King David was chosen while still a boy. When the prophet Samuel was seeking the future king of Israel, a man offered as candidates his sons who were older and more experienced. Yet the prophet said that the chosen one was the young David, who was out tending the flock (cf. 1 Sam 16:6-13), for "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (v. 7). The glory of youth is in the heart, more than in physical strength or the impression given to others.

10. Solomon, when he had to succeed his father, felt lost and told God: "I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act" (1 Kg 3:7). Yet the audacity of youth moved him to ask God for wisdom and he devoted himself to his mission. Something similar happened to the prophet Jeremiah, called despite his youth to rouse his people. In his fear, he said: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jer 1:6). But the Lord told him not to say that (cf. Jer 1:7), and added: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jer 1:8). The devotion of the prophet Jeremiah to his mission shows what can happen when the brashness of youth is joined to the power of God.

11. A Jewish servant girl of the foreign commander Naaman intervened with faith and helped him to be cured of his illness (cf. 2 Kg 5:2-6). The young Ruth was a model of generosity in remaining beside her mother-in-law who had fallen on hard times (cf. Ru 1:1-18), yet she also showed boldness in getting ahead in life (cf. Ru 4:1-17).

In the New Testament

12. One of Jesus' parables (cf. Lk 15:11-32) relates that a "younger" son wanted to leave his father's home for a distant land (cf. vv. 12-13). Yet his thoughts of independence turned into dissolution and excess (cf. v. 13), and he came to experience the bitterness of loneliness and poverty (cf. vv. 14-16). Nonetheless, he found the strength to make a new start (cf. vv. 17-19) and determined to get up and return home (cf. v. 20). Young hearts are naturally ready to change, to turn back, get up and learn from life. How could anyone fail to support that son in this new resolution? Yet his older brother already had a heart grown old; he let himself be possessed by greed, selfishness and envy (Lk 15:28-30). Jesus praises the young sinner who returned to the right path over the brother who considered himself faithful, yet lacked the spirit of love and mercy.

13. Jesus, himself eternally young, wants to give us hearts that are ever young. God's word asks us to "cast out the old leaven that you may be fresh dough" (1 Cor 5:7). Saint Paul invites us to strip ourselves of the "old self" and to put on a "young" self (Col 3:9-10).[1] In explaining what it means to put on that youthfulness "which is being renewed" (v. 10), he mentions "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other if anyone has a complaint against another" (Col 3:12-13). In a word, true youth means having a heart capable of loving, whereas everything that separates us from others makes the soul grow old. And so he concludes: "above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14).

14. Let us also keep in mind that Jesus had no use for adults who looked down on the young or lorded it over them. On the contrary, he insisted that "the greatest among you must become like the youngest" (Lk 22:26). For him age did not establish privileges, and being young did not imply lesser worth or dignity.

15. The word of God says that young people should be treated "as brothers" (1 Tim 5:1), and warns parents not to "provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col 3:21). Young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better. That is why I constantly urge young people not to let themselves be robbed of hope; to each of them I repeat: "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Tim 4:12).

16. Nonetheless, young people are also urged "to accept the authority of those who are older" (1 Pet 5:5). The Bible never ceases to insist that profound respect be shown to the elderly, since they have a wealth of experience; they have known success and failure, life's joys and afflictions, its dreams and disappointments. In the silence of their heart, they have a store of experiences that can teach us not to make mistakes or be taken in by false promises. An ancient sage asks us to respect certain limits and to master our impulses: "Urge the younger men to be self-controlled" (Tit 2.6). It is unhelpful to buy into the cult of youth or foolishly to dismiss others simply because they are older or from another generation. Jesus tells us that the wise are able to bring forth from their store things both new and old (cf. Mt 13:52). A wise young person is open to the future, yet still capable of learning something from the experience of others.

17. In the Gospel of Mark, we find a man who, listening to Jesus speak of the commandments, says, "All these I have observed from my youth" (10:20).

The Psalmist had already said the same thing: "You, O Lord, are my hope; my trust, O Lord, from my youth... from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds" (Ps 71:5.17). We should never repent of spending our youth being good, opening our heart to the Lord, and living differently.

None of this takes away from our youth but instead strengthens and renews it: "Your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps 103:5). For this reason, Saint Augustine could lament: "Late have I loved you, beauty ever ancient, ever new! Late have I loved you!"[2] Yet that rich man, who had been faithful to God in his youth, allowed the passing years to rob his dreams; he preferred to remain attached to his riches (cf. Mk 10:22).

18. On the other hand, in the Gospel of Matthew we find a young man (cf. 19:20.22) who approaches Jesus and asks if there is more that he can do (v. 20); in this, he demonstrates that youthful openness of spirit which seeks new horizons and great challenges. Yet his spirit was not really that young, for he had already become attached to riches and comforts. He said he wanted something more, but when Jesus asked him to be generous and distribute his goods, he realized that he could not let go of everything he had. In the end, "hearing these words, the young man went away sad" (v. 22). He had given up his youth.

19. The Gospel also speaks about a group of wise young women, who were ready and waiting, while others were distracted and slumbering (cf. Mt 25:1-13). We can, in fact, spend our youth being distracted, skimming the surface of life, half-asleep, incapable of cultivating meaningful relationships or experiencing the deeper things in life. In this way, we can store up a paltry and unsubstantial future. Or we can spend our youth aspiring to beautiful and great things, and thus store up a future full of life and interior richness.

20. If you have lost your inner vitality, your dreams, your enthusiasm, your optimism and your generosity, Jesus stands before you as once he stood before the dead son of the widow, and with all the power of his resurrection he urges you: "Young man, I say to you, arise!" (Lk 7:14).

21. To be sure, many other passages of the word of God can shed light on this stage of your life. We will take up some of them in the following chapters.