

Christmas I 2018 (Year C)

I remember that moment clearly, when, in a moment of exasperation, my mother shook her head and said, 'You used to be such a lovely little child.' I was about the age of Jesus in our Gospel reading when she said this, and although I was probably even more of a nightmare as I travelled through my teenage years, her love never wavered, even in the face of extreme provocation!

When we read or hear the account of the Finding of Christ in the Temple, it always strikes me that it's a curious story. In fact, at first sight to our modern understanding, Jesus doesn't come across in anything other than a bit of a spoiled brat. In the face of his religious upbringing – the record here of Joseph and Mary travelling to Jerusalem for the Passover (one of the great Pilgrim Festivals of Judaism) – he plays hooky when they assume him to be travelling back to Nazareth with them, when he has wilfully taken it upon himself to do his own thing. The confidence of youth. Can you imagine the angst and worry of the parents in searching for their child? Nowadays *they* are the ones who would be had up for child neglect! Then there is that scene in the Temple courtyard – the amazement of the Teachers of the Law at the questions and answers - his response to his worried mother which seems a bit like a metaphorical slap on the cheek to both her and Joseph – the voiceless father of Luke's Gospel.

Yet of course there is far more to this little vignette than first meets the eye, Luke is using it as a bridge to cover what are known as the 'hidden years,' before Jesus starts his ministry. The other thing to note is that compared to the stories of the childhood of Jesus contained in the so-called 'Infancy Gospel of Thomas,' a book which although early, never made it into the Bible, the Finding of Christ in the Temple (which is also mirrored in the Infancy Gospel) is a perfectly believable account, unlike the fantastical stories of bringing clay birds to life and cursing various of his playmates. The early Fathers of the Church rejected that book as part of the canon. They recognised genuine writings.

So what is the relevance of this account?

St. Luke's focus, of course, is on the identity of Jesus. He has already established that Jesus is the Son of David and the Son of God in his radiant infancy narratives where John the Baptist is portrayed as the great forerunner, the final great prophet, whose witness starts when he leaps in his mother's womb when Elizabeth greets Mary.

Now, the young Jesus is shown to be faithful to the law of Israel and further fulfils the expectations and prophecies of the Old Testament in the Temple. In his dialogue with the elders he establishes a new way of approaching Torah, something which will become the running theme of his whole ministry: 'I come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them.' *Matt 5: 17*¹

¹ Luke 24:44

44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

Luke has already revealed the radical nature of the person of Jesus, whose ministry will not be limited to his own people, but to all who seek to follow the call to new life he will offer (Simeon's utterance, 'A light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel. *Luke 2: 32*) The fullest understanding of the nature of this offer is of course revealed in the Pascal mystery of his death and resurrection, and even these few verses contain pointers towards this. It takes place during the Passover, as the Passion will. The questioning of the teachers and doctors prefigures the trial when amazement will have turned to hostility, and the three-day search with the happy ending the Resurrection itself.

So what of the words of Jesus in reply to Mary which seem to us to be so dismissive of his parents? 'Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that it was **necessary** for me to be about my Father's business? They also prefigure the Pascal victory when angels tell the women at the tomb, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen,' (*Luke 24:5*)

You will note that I have translated the little Greek word in Jesus's answer to his mother as 'necessary' rather than the feeble 'I must be' of the NRSV. Luke uses this again and again: 'It was necessary for the Christ to suffer and so enter into his glory.' 'It was necessary for me to be about my Father's business.' 'It was necessary for us to celebrate and rejoice, for my son was lost and is found. He was dead, and has returned to life.' Luke uses the imagery of being lost to represent death. We sometimes say it's all in a word, and it really is in this case! We understand the divine urgency and purpose of the Messiah's mission.

Luke then moves the whole account to that of obedience and then in one verse we are taken through the next twenty years or so, as Jesus, 'increased in wisdom and stature, and in divine and human favour.' (*2:52*)

In the space of eleven verses, Luke has used his eloquent writing to take us on a journey of enriching our own understanding of Jesus and his destiny. Ultimately this is part of our own journey of transformation in knowing the call of Jesus within our own lives and seeking to display his Resurrection light in all that we do, knowing that our ultimate destiny is towards unity with the Divine Love itself.

However, one more thing I think enriches our understanding of this passage. Again, it is an image Luke has already used in the previous chapter and this time concerns Mary. She, on hearing the words of the shepherds at the Nativity treasured what she had been told and pondered them in her heart. I suppose a modern word which might mirror 'pondering' is 'contemplating.'

Now she treasures what has happened in seeking her son, together with the interaction she subsequently has with him. Luke wants us to see Mary as the model of Christian discipleship, from the way she accepts her destiny and the inextricable nature of the journey she will make with Jesus. Her love, like my own mother's, never fails her child. She experiences Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost. What a journey! Like her, we should take time to journey with Jesus, to contemplate the Scriptures and allow ourselves to be continually drawn to the knowledge that we ourselves are part of the Divine story.



The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple - William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

I Samuel 2: 18-20

¹⁸ Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁹ His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. ²⁰ Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, 'May the Lord repay^[f] you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to^[g] the Lord'; and then they would return to their home.

Colossians 3: 12-17

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[h] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[i] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[j] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Luke 2: 41-end

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended, and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ 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.’⁴⁹ He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them.⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.