

Luke 2:41-end

1 Samuel 2:18-20,26; Colossians 3:12-17

When we look back to our childhoods – however long ago that might have been – there are probably certain memorable moments which particularly stand out for us. It may have been a really *nice* memory, like a memorable birthday celebration, or maybe a special holiday. These are the kinds of memories which are usually captured in photographs which we keep in much-treasured photo albums. If you have children or grandchildren, of course, these days we don't need to wait for photos to be processed, but we can immediately share our treasured memories of our children or grandchildren via Facebook and other social media. By contrast, though, there are those memories of childhood we might rather forget about – maybe particularly *sad* occasions, or even those occasions when we had been especially naughty or rebellious – these are memories we perhaps would not particularly want to treasure.

On the surface of it, the incident recorded in our Gospel reading today might seem like one which Mary and Joseph would rather have forgotten about. After all, it involved their 12-year-old boy disappearing for a few days and causing them *not little* anxiety in the bargain. It might look like Jesus was simply being another rebellious teenager, wanting to do things his own way; I gather from folk who have children that teenagers tend to do this kind of thing from time to time. But, when we look more closely at what's going on here, there's a lot more to this incident than might at first appear. Far from being something which Jesus' parents would have rather erased from their memory, it was actually a memory which his mother "treasured...in her heart." Mary no doubt shared with Luke the evangelist *many* different memories from Jesus' childhood, but this one obviously stood out particularly, and so it is the only story from Jesus' boyhood which we have recorded in the Gospels. Of course, at the time, Mary and Joseph would not have grasped the significance of the incident; in particular, Jesus' mysterious response to his mother's mild

rebuke – “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” – must have remained somewhat puzzling. But years later, after her Son’s death, resurrection and Ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Mary would no doubt have looked back and reflected on this memory, now as a faithful disciple of her son, and finally grasped what it was all about.

The incident occurs in the context of a visit to a festival in Jerusalem. All male Jews were required to go up to the Temple three times a year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, and it was evidently the custom of the holy family to go there as a *whole* family at Passover. And travelling back from Jerusalem in a large contingent, Mary and Joseph suddenly discover that Jesus isn’t with them. It was easy for them to take a while to notice this, as the women and small children would usually be at the front of the party and the men and older boys at the back, so Mary and Joseph may well have assumed that Jesus was with the other group. And so, when they head back to the city, they find Jesus

amongst the religious teachers in the Temple precincts. In terms of Christ’s humanity, it indicates a real thirst for knowledge on his part; he was clearly making the most of opportunities for learning during his visit to the holy city. And as education at the time tended to emphasise the discussion of problems, a bright pupil could both ask *and* answer questions. Hence the teachers in the Temple were amazed at Jesus’ understanding and his *answers*. His parents, too, were astonished, clearly not expecting anything like this – though Jesus himself expresses surprise that they should be surprised.

So, the episode reveals something of the development of Jesus as a human being; as Luke notes, he “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour”, that’s to say, he progressed spiritually, intellectually, physically and socially. In this we see something of an echo of our Old Testament reading where the boy Samuel is described as continuing “to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.” What’s more, both Jesus and Samuel were being equipped

for the task of bringing God's word of justice to his faithless people.

But there seems to be some further reason why Luke chose to include this specific episode in his Gospel. So, what is that reason? Well, it's important to note that it's not the actual visit to Jerusalem itself that Luke wants to highlight here, but rather what happened *afterwards*. A literal translation of the text goes something like this – 'When he was twelve, and they had gone up [to Jerusalem], and when the feast was ended, when they were returning, Jesus stayed behind.' The *last* bit of this is what's being emphasised here, and the whole story climaxes in Jesus' answer to his mother's rebuke – "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my *Father's* house?" Because this says something crucial about who Jesus really *is*. This is a divine word spoken by Jesus himself – the Word-made-Flesh – declaring that his relationship with God is deeper than, and different from, anything ever known before. *He* had a relationship to God shared by *no* other person. He *is* the one and only

Son of the Father. In fact, this is also where the parallel with Samuel ends; because Samuel, the assistant to Eli the priest, was then called to be a *prophet*, whereas Jesus is *much more* than a prophet. Indeed, the message of the angels to the shepherds had already declared the identity of Jesus, that he is 'Saviour', 'Messiah' and 'Lord' (as we noted on Christmas Day).

And implied in the Boy Jesus' reply to his mother is the fact that he must be about his Father's *business*. And his Father's *business* – his mission – is to reconcile the world to himself through his Son. Yes, Jesus himself is uniquely the Son of God – fully divine and fully human. Yet at the same time, Jesus invites those who put their trust in God through him, into an intimate relationship with his Father, such that we *too* have the privilege to call God 'Father'/'Abba'/'Daddy'. Jesus has come into the world so that others might become sons and daughters of God; as the prologue to John's Gospel puts it, "...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become *children* of

God...” And that work of reconciling the world to his Father reached its climax in his death on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead. In fact, there is something of a parallel between this story and that of the appearance of the *risen* Lord Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, towards the *end* of Luke’s Gospel. Just as the holy family had left Jerusalem and had to go back to find Jesus, so the two disciples had left Jerusalem and then returned. In the case of the disciples, though, *they* had left the holy city in a sorrowful state, the crucifixion of their Master having dashed all their hopes and dreams; but, they were to go back to Jerusalem with great joy, having met their risen Lord, who had now *completed* his Father’s business here on earth.

So, what does all this have to say to us today? Well, briefly, a couple of things. First of all, we need to be clear today about who Jesus really *is*. In our post-modern, multi-faith society, in which it’s generally held that all religions are just different ways to the same divine reality, we’re reminded here that Jesus Christ is *unique*. He is both fully God and fully human

– he is ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’ – the only one who can bring us into relationship with God, so that we might become *children* of God. And then secondly, we’re reminded today of what living as a child of God ought to look like. In our reading from his Letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul talks of us putting to death what is ‘earthly’ and putting on those virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We are to be those who bear with one another, forgiving one another (just as God has forgiven us), and to be those whose lives are characterised by love, peace and thankfulness. We need to be grounded in God’s word, allowing it to dwell in us richly, and to live our lives to God’s glory – doing everything in *his* name. Are we truly living our lives in keeping with our calling as children of God? So, perhaps a couple of things for us to ponder as we come to the close of one year and enter into another.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for guiding and sustaining us through the past year, through all its ups and downs. As we journey on into a new year, help us to walk more closely with you, through your Son Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.