

My Father's House? Where?

Readings: 1 Sam. 2:18-20, 26 & Luke 2: 41-52

Well Christmas celebrations and festivities are all over for another year, maybe in your house there are a few mince pies left or a slice of Christmas cake?

In our gospel reading Jesus went to a celebration, a festival in Jerusalem. He was 12 years old and he had gone with Mary and Joseph to the celebration of Passover, which was followed immediately by the seven day Feast of Unleavened bread. An eight day celebration, not just Christmas Day and Boxing Day – although I think Christmas cake sounds more appetizing than unleavened bread! I find this story tantalizing because there are so many things Luke doesn't tell us about in this story. Luke doesn't tell us whether this was the first Passover celebration Jesus had been to, although it does say that his parents went regularly. Did they by now have other children and were they with them as well? If so, were they distracted by looking after the other children that they didn't realize that Jesus wasn't with them? Where did Jesus stay in Jerusalem after his parents left? All sorts of questions arise in my mind about this story. But Luke carefully selects just this one snapshot of an important event between His birth and the start of His ministry; an incident that goes right to the heart of who Jesus is. It's also a very human story with distraught parents and a child saying you don't understand me – sound familiar? This incident is sandwiched between two verses that describe Jesus' development as a child; verse 40 "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favour of God was upon him" and verse 52 "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man." Both verses emphasise his physical development, the blessing of God upon him and his growth in wisdom, echoing similar words about John the Baptist and the prophet Samuel. So with those two bookends in mind let's look in more detail at this incident. I want us to look at four questions in particular in this story:

- 1) What does it tell us about the parents?
- 2) How did Jesus respond to their concern?
- 3) Where did the parents find their son?
- 4) What was Jesus doing?

What does it tell us about the parents? Here we have the Holy Family going up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the annual celebration of the miraculous deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. All Jewish adult males were expected to attend Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, so they became known as the three pilgrim feasts. Passover, however, began as a family observance and certainly today is very much a family gathering. Although only males were commanded to attend, women and children were certainly not excluded. What is clear in Luke's account is that Joseph and Mary were very devout and observant Jews. Earlier on in the gospel we had the story of Jesus' circumcision, presentation at the Temple and Mary's purification rites after childbirth, and here 12 years later we have Joseph and Mary at their regular Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Avoiding Samaria, it would be about a 3-4 day journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem, and it was not uncommon for whole groups of people to travel together for safety and companionship to such events. In such companies, often the women and the children were at the front and the men brought up the rear. Jesus, being 12, could have been with the men or with the children, so perhaps Mary thought that Jesus was with Joseph and Joseph thought that he was with Mary. (Does this sound familiar to parents?) At the end of the day when they reformed their family groups, Mary and Joseph found that Jesus was not with their friends and relatives at all! I suspect they would have stayed the night with the group and then retraced their steps the next day and spent the day after, which would be the third day, looking for Jesus in Jerusalem.

I wonder if you have ever lost one of your children? I'm embarrassed to say that I lost one of mine when we lived in Maidstone in Kent. We lived quite close to the town centre and I had walked down into town with my three children to do some shopping. On the way back we popped into a shop to look at some computer stuff. It was only after we began to leave the shop we realized our youngest, Ben, was not with us. We searched the shop, retraced our steps back into town looking for him. We even went to the police station to see if someone had found him and taken him there. All to no avail, we had lost him. So we heavy heart I went home with the other two children to tell Jean that I had lost our youngest child. I didn't really know what to say to her, but when we arrived home there was Ben. He had had the sense to realize he was on his own and just walked home! I think Mary and Joseph had a far more stressful experience than I did. To lose a child can be heart wrenching, but this was no ordinary child – Mary and Joseph had been entrusted by God with the Messiah! The One whom all Jewish hopes were placed and they had lost Him! Twelve years earlier they had been in Bethlehem and heard the words of the shepherds and the wise men. They had heard those words, confirming their earlier angelic visitations that this child was indeed the Messiah. I think they would have been frantic with worry. Not only that, but there would have been that element of blame, “Why didn't we take better care of him? If only I or you had done this or that.” Perhaps we pick up Mary's frustration in her words “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress” (v48). Tom Wright translates it “your father and I have been in a terrible state looking for you”.

Secondly how did Jesus respond? We have the first recorded words of Jesus in this passage in Luke “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” What does that tell us about Jesus' understanding of His person? Did you notice the way in which father is used in two ways? Mary says “*your father* and I have been frantically searching for you”, Jesus says didn't you know I must be in *my Father's* house. Mary was using father in the human parent sense, Jesus is referring to His heavenly Father. We don't know what Mary told Jesus about His conception and birth. We can only conclude that part of Jesus' growing in wisdom and favour with God, was for Him to begin to understand who He was as the incarnate Son of God.

Michael Wilcock helpfully adds this in his commentary on this passage “So the first recorded words of Jesus are a statement about himself, and a claim to a relationship between himself and God different from, and deeper than, anything that had ever been known before. Furthermore, it is a relationship into which he is going to bring all others who are prepared to put their faith in God through him. He will teach them to address their prayers regularly to their ‘Father’ (Luke 11:2), and they will learn to use the affectionate, intimate name ‘Abba’ (‘Daddy’) which he himself uses. Both these truths—that he is Son of God, and that he has come into the world so that others may become sons of God—are implied in his words in verse 49.”

Thirdly, where did Mary and Joseph find Jesus? They found Him in the Temple and He astonished His parents by saying that He was in His Father's house, at least that is what the context suggests. Others prefer to translate it “I would have to be getting involved with my Father's work” or as the Authorised Version puts “I must be about my Father's business”. As many businesses were conducted from people's homes, both could be correct. If we follow the translation in my Father's house, then this was to be the location of many of the disputes between Jesus and the religious authorities almost 20 years later. Then again, many would be astonished by His teaching. The Temple was the visible manifestation of the presence of God among His people. The Temple of course was modelled on the Tabernacle of Moses, where in the wilderness the pillar of cloud came down and God spoke with Moses. Right in the centre of the Tabernacle, behind the thick curtain, was the ark of the covenant, and in Numbers 7 we read, “when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the covenant, from between the two

cherubim; and it spoke to him” (v89.) The Temple in Jesus’ time had no ark of the covenant, it disappeared at the time of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple. Nevertheless, the Temple still symbolised the presence of God with His people and was the centre of religious learning. So it was appropriate that Jesus would take the opportunity of spending as much time as possible within the Temple courts. He knew that the Temple would be destroyed within a generation, but something greater was afoot in the work he was to accomplish. As he said to the woman at the well “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” (John 4:21-23). God had something else in mind, He was going to break out of the confines of the Temple when the curtain was torn and dwell within His people, so that each of them would become temples of the Spirit of God. Isn’t that what Paul said? “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:16-17). And again in 2 Corinthians Paul says “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16). The glories of the new covenant, God with us! Jesus at the end of Matthew says “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). Go out from the confines of your borders to the ends of the earth and Jesus, by His Spirit, is with you. The Temple is where God dwells but now you are the Temple where God dwells by His Spirit and that has no geographical boundaries! You take the presence of God everywhere you go, and especially as you gather together in His name.

Fourthly what was Jesus doing? They found him among the teachers in the Temple precincts, where He was listening to them and asking them questions. This was a customary place for teaching. There may have been limited opportunities in Nazareth to engage with the leading Jewish teachers of the day, so Jesus was making the most of the opportunity of learning while he was in Jerusalem. We assume he was sitting among the teachers in the Temple for over two days. Here was one of the ways Jesus was growing in wisdom. The educational system of the day seems to have put emphasis on questions and answers rather than just rote learning. This gave scope for a bright pupil both to ask and answer questions. In terms of the culture of the day Jesus, at 12 years old, was beginning to make the transition from a child to an adult. As far as we know, the celebration of *bar mitzvah* was not yet established in Jewish culture. Today in religious Jewish families this occurs when the male child reaches 13 years of age. But we can say that Jesus was approaching the full responsibility of manhood. He demonstrates here an insatiable desire for learning, but also a wisdom to see how different truths fit together, so the teachers were amazed at his understanding and his answers. May we never think we have arrived in our knowledge, there is yet more for God to bring forth from His word to us. However, old we are, yet there is more to know of God. But may we also never stop questioning. It was one of the lessons I learnt as a scientist – go on asking the questions why, how and what? I was never able to answer some of the questions I had, but they spurred me to think more deeply and try to piece the knowledge I had into a coherent whole. May we always be doing that in our Christian lives too. We can easily say “We’ll never fully understand God” as a cop out. We need to be more like Mary and ponder what we know, turn it over in our minds. It may take years or an experience like Pentecost for the penny to drop. Or the journey itself may bring the rewards.

So here we have this very human story of the trials of parenting and growing up. As we come to the new year of 2019 may we all, whatever our age, like Jesus in our story increase in wisdom and in favour with God and man. Amen.