

Among the Teachers

First Sunday of Christmass

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:41-52

It's a big jump! Last Tuesday we were celebrating the birth of Jesus; today he is twelve years old and behaving like a teenager. But the truth is there is very little recorded about Jesus' early life: next week we will hear of the visit of the Magi at The Epiphany; at Candlemass we will hear of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple; so today is a good chance to slip in the one remaining episode from the childhood of Jesus.

It is a vivid picture. Luke conveys something of the sense of trust amongst the pilgrims. Jesus has been missing for a whole day but Mary and Joseph feel no sense of anxiety: they assume that he is with some of the other travellers and feel no need to find out who or where. We also learn that the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was an annual event. This prepares us for the next event in his life, for in two weeks time we will hear how Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. This was twenty years after today's event but we now know that Jesus and his family were regular visitors to Jerusalem so it will come as no surprise that this northerner should turn up in the south where John is baptizing. Jesus's family were experienced travellers. It is also reasonable to assume that they were not poor: the annual pilgrimage would have cost them two or three weeks in lost trade or earnings.

In many ways Jesus comes across as a typical almost-teenager. He has been missing for three days; his parents had looked all over Jerusalem; they must have been quite frantic and when they find him his mother offers a very mild rebuke:

Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.

Luke 2:48

Jesus replies, with kind of arrogance that we have all exhibited at that kind of age,

Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?

Luke 2:49

It is all reassuring normal! Jesus is no model child. But alongside the youthful arrogance there is still a sense that he is beginning to discern something of his vocation. He wants to be in the Temple listening to the scribes and Pharisees as if he knows that one day he will be numbered among them. It is unlikely that he knows that one day he will have to oppose and contradict them.

We know little of the next twenty years. Luke tells us that Mary 'treasured' these memories – he had made a very similar comment after the visit of the shepherds. It is also clear that she did not understand why he had to be with the teachers in the Temple. It is fascinating to speculate how she might have felt over the next twenty years. She had had a remarkable revelation from the angel. She had been told that her son would be Son of the Most High and would occupy the throne of David. Did she ever wonder when he was going to take some decisive action? To put it in some kind of perspective, England's Edward IV had seized the throne by the time he was eighteen years old yet at the age of thirty three Jesus was still a village carpenter in the back of beyond: did Mary ever feel she wanted to force his hand?

If she ever tried to do so we know nothing of it; all we know is that Luke tells us that Jesus 'grew in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour'. It is reasonable to assume that the annual visits to Jerusalem continued and that Jesus spent more and more time with the teachers in the Temple. Perhaps they acted as mentors to him, seeing him as a potential teacher himself. Perhaps the elders back in Nazareth took some pride in their very own protégé. But whatever pressure there may have been from either his mother or others for him to put himself forward, he had the wisdom to know that he had to wait. Not until the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert was the time right.

Luke's observation that Jesus' increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour' is surely significant. A very similar phrase was used of Samuel who 'continued to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.' This is not the first time that Luke has drawn a parallel between Jesus and Samuel: it occurs a little earlier in his Gospel where he records that Mary responds to the visit to her cousin Elizabeth with a poem or a song of praise. (Luke 1:47ff) This song, known to history as The Magnificat, bears a striking resemblance to a similar song proclaimed by Hannah, the mother of Samuel, as she leaves her son at the Temple at Shiloh. (1 Samuel 2:1-10)

What are we to make of this? We could assume that Mary did indeed sing a hymn of praise very similar to that sung by Hannah; she may have done this by divine inspiration without knowing what she was doing; or she could have been totally aware that she was imitating Hannah. Or it could be that we have no idea whether she actually sang the Magnificat but Luke puts the words in her mouth because the parallel between Jesus and Samuel implies that Mary must have sung something equivalent to the Song of Hannah, just as he must have 'increased in divine and human favour' as did Samuel.'

What Luke is telling us that the great themes of divine history are recurring. That may not cut much ice with us but it was everything to the people of Jesus' time. Samuel was one of the greatest prophets of Jewish history so for Jesus' own biography to include similar details adds to his sense of authority, authenticity. In a similar way, twenty years later, the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the hill of the transfiguration gave him further authority.

For all that Jesus spoke arrogantly to his mother, Luke tells us that in the years that followed he was obedient to his parents. The gospel reading ends on a note of mutual trust, rather as it began. And this sense of mutual obedience permeates the second reading, from Colossians. This is a description of how Christians should live together. It is a picture of how life in this congregation should be. The words used are of great significance: compassion, love, forgiveness, meekness, patience, peace harmony, gratitude. But lest we should think that the Christian life is a bed of roses Paul introduces the word 'admonish'. I am afraid I cannot

recall ever using the word 'admonish' in ordinary conversation but the dictionary tells me it means 'warn, advise, reprimand'. Paul is reminding his readers that amidst the love and harmony there may need to be hard words. But perhaps we might also draw the conclusion that hard words can only be spoken in a context of love.

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