

SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS (Year C) – St Mary's 27.12.09

Just two days after celebrating Jesus' birth, Luke brings us the story of the approach of adulthood for Jesus. In Jewish law every adult male born within fifteen miles of Jerusalem has to attend the Passover. Indeed, all Jewish males at that time would wish to attend the feast at least once in their lifetime.

Adulthood began for a Jewish boy at the age of twelve. In becoming a man he also became a son of the law, and took the obligations of the law upon himself. This included attending the Passover for the first time.

We can well imagine how this experience absorbs Jesus. The wonderful buildings of the city and the astonishing liturgies and rituals in the Temple doubtless fascinate him.

When his parents begin their journey home, Jesus lingers behind. From our 21st century perspective it seems astonishing that neither parent notices the absence of this young man. But it is not carelessness that causes them to miss him. It is normal for the women in a caravan to set out well before the men for they travel more slowly. The men catch up the women by nightfall when they encamp. It is Jesus' first Passover, and it is likely that each parent thinks that Jesus is with the other, until they find that he is not there in the evening. Those who have lost a child of any age, however fleetingly, will know the deep and instinctive fear, anguish, terror, which hits one the moment such a loss is discovered.

And so they return to Jerusalem, and they find him amongst the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court, presided over by the high priest. We should perhaps not imagine a scene with a precocious boy dominating a crowd of his seniors - as he has sometimes been portrayed down the centuries in art. It is more likely that he is hearing and asking questions - a regular Jewish expression for a student learning from his teachers. Jesus is listening and searching for knowledge like any bright 12 year old.

And then comes one of the key passages in the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. "Look", Mary says, "your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety". Jesus' reply seems at first to be extraordinary. He appears to ignore the deep anxiety that Mary and Joseph must have felt. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?". Luke is very gently but very definitely showing us through this rebuke that Jesus' concept of father is moving from Joseph to God. It is a challenge and a steep learning curve for his parents. He is no longer solely bound to them or constrained by their expectations. Luke is telling us that Jesus has come to the astonishing realisation that in some way that he has a unique and mysterious relationship with God the Father. That He is the unique Son of God.

This is the story of how Jesus became aware of the person he was. But we are not given any sense that he had become arrogant or headstrong as a result of this. He did not start to look down upon the gentle Mary and the hard working Joseph. Luke says that he went home with them and was obedient to them. Luke is underlining for us the link between Jesus' humanity and his divinity. There is also an important link here between Luke's expression of Jesus' natural ease and authority in the Temple and his account of Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem. For though the leaders are amazed at his understanding and his answers, their wonder has the potential to turn, as it did later, into hostility.

This story is also a challenge to faithful Israelites to raise their sights and to acknowledge that they cannot continue to be restrained by their own preconceived understandings. Now he is to transcend them and to be freed to move out to the Gentiles. Luke is almost certainly influenced here by the conflicts in the early church which had difficulty in reconciling itself with the Gentile mission. Like Mary and Joseph, the Jewish-Christian community had to learn not to constrict the freedom of the outreach which God's action in Jesus demanded. Nevertheless, this did not lessen the ties with the Jewish people, as Jesus' obedience to his parents indicates.

This story is also a challenge for us to accept Jesus for who he is – Son of God – and also for us to accept that God is not bound to accept and to fulfil our expectations. This story puts challenges before us at the start of a new year. Firstly, how deeply do we accept the divine mystery that Jesus' reveals here? How do we understand who Jesus is, and what his mission involves for us? And what are our expectations? If we dig deeply into our inner being do we find that we expect things to remain much as they are, with little or no change? Do we expect to resist change or to be open to it when it comes – both in our spiritual and secular lives? What is God expecting of us as individuals, as families, and as a Christian community in the coming year?

In seeking a way to look at these questions, this story, and Mary in particular, offers us a starting point. Luke is giving us much more than a pictorial or mental or emotional account of Jesus upbringing. Mary does not understand what she sees and hears. In common with us and all followers of Jesus, she must wait and see what will unfold, who he will become and where his Father will lead him. She stands with the Church itself, trusting that this child comes from God, consenting to obedience, and straining to understand. May we follow with her. Amen.