

2nd January 2022 – 10am service

Sermon (Revd Kate Massey, Vicar of St Pauls Stockingford; Dean of Women's Ministry)

I once left a child in church. It was during my curacy and a miscommunication between myself and my husband, combined with a well-meaning but disastrous intervention by a parishioner, meant that we left one of our three daughters behind after a service. Our daughter was completely fine – fussed over and swiftly returned to us by doting members of our congregation – but I will never forget the heart-dropping moment of arriving home and my husband saying: “Where’s Niamh?” That moment of abject parenting failure was made easier to bear by a recent news story where the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, his wife, and entire security detail had managed to leave his daughter in a pub. And of course, Mary and Joseph had this experience too. But other than providing reassurance to every parent who has ever realised that a child is not where they are supposed to be, what might this gospel story have to say to us today?

Our reading today is a rich one. On one level it is full of very relatable human experience – a lost child, frantic parents, an exasperated question from a frazzled mum, and an insouciant pre-teen wondering what all the fuss is about. But on another it is laden with symbolism and allusions to other historical and biblical narratives.

Luke is writing mainly for a Gentile audience, to a culture where the biographies of great leaders frequently included episodes of precocious childhood behaviour. Caesar Augustus, for example, gave an address at the funeral of his aunt, aged only 12, astounding his listeners. Luke includes this story perhaps to reassure new Christians who are resisting the Caesar cult that the true Lord – Jesus Christ – had shown similar distinction at a young age.

This reading in the lectionary is paired with the childhood of the Old Testament leader, Samuel, and there are strong links between the two passages. Both have children left in a Temple – although in Samuel’s case, this was on purpose – both are closer to God than the adults around them, both will strive to draw God’s people back to God and both stories finish with the conclusion that the children grew in stature and favour with God and people.

But my favourite allusion is to the Emmaus road story – remember the one where on Easter Sunday two disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, broken after the death of Jesus, before he meets them, teaches them and then reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread. There are so many parallels between the two tales.

Despairing, frantic and confused, on the third day, Mary and Joseph found their son. Despairing, frantic and bemused, on the third day, two travellers encountered a stranger on the Emmaus road. In both cases, these closest to Jesus pour out their hurt and confusion. In both cases, there is a gentle reminder of what Jesus was about. To Mary and Joseph – did you not realise, I **MUST** be in my Father’s house- or as other translations put it – about my Father’s business. To the disciples on the Emmaus road – Was it not **NECESSARY** that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? The Greek word behind the phrase must be and necessary is the same one – *dei*. It means it is binding, it is necessary, it is proper; in short it is inevitable. Anyway, more of why these two readings mirror each other in a moment.

The words Jesus speaks in our reading today are the first things he says himself in Luke's gospel, and they are worthy of a bit of attention. Firstly, is the use of the word "Father". It brings us up short, coming as it does straight after Mary's words: "Your father and I have been searching for you..." This child Jesus, just on the cusp of maturity, knows who he is, knows that despite his devoted earthly father, Joseph, his true Father is in heaven. I am told that it was not usual for Jews of that time to refer to God as their Father, and Jesus using this language indicates an intimacy of relationship with God which is new in human experience.

The phrase "in my Father's house" has been difficult for people to translate, with other options being "about my Father's business" or "about my Father's concerns". I would suggest that "my Father's house" does not simply mean the geographical space of the Temple, although it works on that level, but also the work of faith he was engaged in there. A household in New Testament times was not just a home – it was a community of family members and sometimes servants, it was an economic unit, a family business of sorts, where all who were of an age to do so contributed to the work of the household, often defined by the trade of the head of the house. As a child of his Father's house, Jesus is engaged in the work of his Father

And what was that work of the Father? Our story from the other end of the gospel, from the road to Emmaus, brings our answer. It was to fulfil the scriptures, suffer and die, before rising again in glory, to make a way for all God's children to be forgiven and welcomed home. As Mary and Joseph searched frantically for their son, how much more is God determined to find us?

These two stories bookend the ministry of Jesus and remind us of what he was about – he was the Son of God, about God's business, which was nothing less than the redemption of all creation. That is the message of Luke's Gospel – that is the hope we celebrate at Christmas.

But one last thing. In writing about this Bible passage, Tom Wright also makes the link between these two readings. He says:

You might call the pair of stories something like "The Jesus You Thought You'd Lost" And if that is the message of the two passages, maybe Luke is wanting to tell us something about his gospel as a whole: maybe he is writing, at one level, at least, for people who have some idea of Jesus but find he is more elusive than they had imagined. Finding him will normally involve a surprise. Jesus doesn't do or say what Mary or Joseph or the two on the road were expecting. It will be like that with us, too. Every time we relax and think we've really understood him, he will be up ahead, or perhaps staying behind while we go on without thinking. Discipleship always involves the unexpected.¹

Anyway, this reflection hit a chord with me in the midst of one of the most chaotic and uncertain Christmases ever. Where is Jesus in all that we are experiencing right now? Perhaps we, like Mary and Joseph, feel frazzled, anxious, broken. Well, the reality is he will be where he always is – about his Father's business of sharing faith, hope and love. If we do likewise, even in the smallest of ways, we cannot fail to bump into him. It will probably when we least expect him, possibly when we feel least prepared, but undoubtedly we will be greeted with love and a gentle reminder that this, this work of faith, hope and love, is what Christmas is all about.

1 Wright, Tom, Luke for Everyone London SPCK 2001 p29-30