

St. Alban's Epping, 30th December 2018

WHEN JESUS GOT LOST

(2 Samuel 2:18-20,26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52)

Whose fault was it? The One sent to be the Saviour of the world is left behind in Jerusalem as a boy – lost! How could it happen?
Or was he really lost?

Let's go back to this story: the only story of Jesus we have in the New Testament between his infancy and the beginning of his public ministry. There are other stories of Jesus in his youth in what are usually called the "apocryphal Gospels", written centuries after the Gospels of the New Testament. They present Jesus as a pretty obnoxious miracle-working child, using his amazing powers to show off, and to get back at people who got on the wrong side of him. I wouldn't take these stories too seriously!

But then we have this slightly embarrassing story from Luke. Mary and Joseph seem to have gone up to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. It was three or four days' walk, and large groups of people would go together in the form of what we might call a caravan, for mutual support and protection. The men and the older boys would be at the front, while the women and children would follow.

And that probably explains how this incident happened. I remember hearing the story of one of my lecturers at Moore College who left behind one of his children as he and his family were travelling in Italy. There were five children in their family: you would think that a missing child would be noticed! But the story is that it took all day to realize that the child was missing. We students were quite amused by the story, though I doubt that it seemed funny to the parents at the time!

We don't know what family Mary and Joseph had by the time Jesus was twelve. Catholics have traditionally believed that Mary and Joseph had no children apart from Jesus, but there is nothing in the scriptures suggesting that this was the case. So perhaps there were other younger children as well to be looked after.

Jesus was becoming a young adult, and no doubt already showing signs of a growing understanding of God and the scriptures. And as a twelve-year-old, where was he going to travel in the caravan? With the women and

children? Or with the men, younger and older? I think that is why nobody noticed that Jesus was not with them for a whole day.

Mary must have assumed that he was with the men, while Joseph assumed he was with the women and children. And as the travellers stopped for the evening, and Mary and Joseph looked for Jesus, they began to realize that he was not with them.

It would not be wise to travel at night, but first thing in the morning, Mary and Joseph would have hurried back to Jerusalem. They would have arrived with only a limited time before sunset, and they failed to find Jesus by evening. No Police Station in those days where they could find him eating an ice cream! And he was not obvious at any of the places they had visited. I imagine that they had another sleepless night!

And then on the third day they got to looking more closely around the temple. They would have seen many people there, especially at Passover time. No doubt many people were wandering around, amazed at the scale and the architectural splendours of an edifice that had already taken nearly thirty years to build: indeed it would take nearly another fifty years to complete. Sadly it was then destroyed by the Romans within ten years!

No doubt there were worshippers in the various courts, not to mention priests, temple assistants, and onlookers. Quite possibly in a number of the side porches of the temple they would have seen groups of Rabbis and their followers. And in one of these groups, there was a very young man, not really more than a boy, actively involved in the discussion.

Yes, young Jesus was involved in a theological discussion with the experts, and astounding them with his knowledge and insight. He was asking questions and sharing his understanding of God and his laws and his purposes. Twenty years later, people like these teachers would be even more astounded by his teaching, although this time many would be disturbed and offended by it.

Of course Mary and Joseph were greatly relieved to find Jesus, but they were also upset that he hadn't made sure he was with them when they started to return to Nazareth. Whose fault then was it that Jesus got lost? "Son, why have you treated us like this?" asks Mary. Her words suggest that it is Jesus' fault that he got lost. I suspect she also wonders whether it

is really the fault of her and Joseph. “If only Joseph had checked, it wouldn’t have happened. If only I had double checked, Jesus wouldn’t have got lost at all.”

However, Jesus had another way of thinking about it. “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know that I must be in my father’s house?” Jesus was saying that **he wasn’t lost at all**. God his true Father had things for him to explore and learn. Mary and Joseph needed to keep up with what his priorities must be. I wonder how Mary and Joseph felt about Jesus’ response. Surprised, no doubt, but were they also a bit put out by his words, which were after all quite challenging?

Jesus was actually saying something quite significant. He was about to begin adulthood as a young man. And of course, he knew that he was not the actual son of Joseph: he was actually the Son of God. And as Jesus moves closer to adult life, he is preparing the way for that type of separation which needs to happen for every child and parent, as children become independent of their parents and assume responsibility for their own lives. Jesus, even at this age, was already setting boundaries.

Mary and Joseph knew that Jesus was God’s son in a unique way, but they did not really understand yet what that involved. Mary would in time see Jesus apparently getting himself into trouble because of his condemnation of those in power, or because of his attitude to traditions held dear by influential people, or because of his welcoming attitude to those regarded as sinners and outsiders.

Like any mother, Mary would want to rescue her son from the trouble he was getting himself into. At times his actions were so radical that she wondered whether he had gone mad. And in the end, she would see her son sentenced to a public and brutal and agonizing death. Simeon had hinted about this when Jesus was a baby, but it was still a horrific thing for a mother to see.

Jesus during his ministry pointed out more than once that our blood families matter, but ultimately our spiritual family and the call of God matter even more. He had to live the life to which God had called him, even when it went against the hopes and desires of Mary and his birth family. So here at age 12, Jesus is discovering more of what it means to be the Son of God. And he is spending time with those teachers who will help

him to explore the scriptures and their message, so that he might know more of God’s purposes and fulfil them.

One of the things that Luke is pointing out as he tells this story is that Jesus didn’t come fully developed: he grew in maturity and understanding, like the rest of us. Indeed he says this at the end of our reading. Jesus benefited from those who could teach and challenge him, so that he could sort out God’s message and God’s purpose for him.

We too as Christ’s followers need to develop and mature, to keep growing in our understanding of God’s message and God’s purposes. That’s why we never get to the point when we can say “I know enough”. We can never rightly say: “I know enough about God, I know enough of the scriptures, I know enough theology.”

Part of the purpose of sermons is to keep us thinking about God’s message, to keep us exploring the scriptures which contain that message in written form; to keep us growing in our understanding, not only of the scriptures, but what they tell us about living as God’s people. As we approach this new year, let me encourage you to keep exploring the scriptures, and to keep exploring your faith and how it works.

You might like to join the group that Ross is having during January to learn more about the Book of Revelation, a book which so many Christians put into the “too hard” basket. You might like to plan to join one of the various Parish groups that meet regularly for fellowship and sharing about our Christian faith and understanding and experience. Why not explore our Parish library with its great selection of books? Or take up one of the patterns of regular reading of the scriptures which are available.

The important thing to remember is that on this earth we never graduate as students of the gospel, students of the scriptures. There is always more. Remember that as **disciples** of Christ, we are literally students, learners.

Today we have been reminded that Jesus also had to learn, he had to grow into the role for which he had been chosen. We are members of his kingdom, we are followers of Jesus. We too need to grow spiritually as we follow Christ. Let us make spiritual growth, and a deepening understanding of God’s word, a real priority in this coming year. Amen.

Paul Weaver