

Readings for the First Sunday after Christmas

29th December 2024

First Reading: 1 Samuel 2:18-20,26

Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the LORD repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the LORD"; and then they would return to their home.

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people.

Second Reading Colossians 13:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Gospel: St Luke 2:41-52

Every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

A Reflection for the First Sunday after Christmas

Today's Gospel reading is the only story we have in the Gospels between Jesus' infancy and his baptism by John probably around the age of thirty. There were other legends around relating to his childhood, but only this one

made the final cut, and it begs the question why is it here? It's probably not for biographical reasons – if so, there would be more. And it's not to remind us how important it is to look after our children properly, especially if one's child is the Son of God, either.

Luke has been described as a theological historian – so he was interested in what the life of Jesus had to tell us about God's purposes. In common with stories from other major figures of antiquity, anecdotes from childhood were used to help establish the identity and authority of the person and to demonstrate their remarkable qualities from an early age. They often foreshadowed themes that would emerge later in that person's life and linked them to significant places and people. Luke does that with all the stories of Jesus' birth, and he does so again here, showing how God shaped Jesus to fulfil his ministry. This story is one that helps establish Jesus' Jewish orthodoxy; it links him to the Temple; and it focuses on teaching which foreshadows Jesus' own later ministry of teaching.

Firstly, orthodoxy. As observant Jews, his parents have faithfully made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover – we are told they went every year. This time, they have taken Jesus with them. As a boy of twelve, he is on the cusp of adulthood, which for Jewish boys is age 13. Jewish practice then was not exactly the same as a *bar mitzvah* would be today, but Jesus was about to become a 'son of the commandment' when he would take on the responsibilities of obedience to the Jewish Law.

Obedience to the will of God, as disclosed in the Law, was more than just following the rules and regulations. It meant taking on the role of an advocate for the will of God, as revealed in that Law. Therefore, he needed to know and understand the Law, as well as being willing to obey it, to use it to discern God's will for his life, and then to do it. Being taken to Jerusalem was in preparation for this.

Secondly is the link to the Temple. The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in CE70, almost certainly before Luke wrote this Gospel, but it was still a central symbol of Judaism. It was the place where, according to traditional Jewish piety, one was most closely exposed to the presence of God. It was important for Luke to show that Jesus was familiar with the Temple and also its teachers. It helped to demonstrate the continuity of Jesus' own ministry from what had gone before and also through into the traditions of the Christian church. It also established that, when Jesus later criticised the Temple leadership and some of its teaching, he knew what he was talking about.

And thirdly, there is the teaching, a theme here that links to his later life and ministry. Instead of setting off on the return journey with his parents, Jesus remained behind to participate in the Jewish interpretative teaching. One of the duties of the religious leaders was to support and supplement family education in matters of faith. Jesus was clearly an able student, amazing the teachers with his understanding and ability to question them, just as he would later continue to amaze people with his teaching and his searching questions in his public ministry. We may think that he had divine foreknowledge in this respect, but this is not actually what the text says. He may well have been a child prodigy, but Luke makes clear that, just like us, he learned as he grew and developed. He was also fully human.

In these ways, Luke uses this story to establish Jesus' credentials as an orthodox Jew, familiar with Temple practice and as a gifted teacher. In doing so, he helps his audience recognise that the ministry of Jesus pointed to God's kingdom.

Towards the end of this story, there is a significant word play on the word 'father'. When Joseph and Mary find Jesus, Mary says to him: 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety', 'father' here referring to Joseph. Jesus' response: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' isn't that of a cheeky child but changes the focus of the word 'father' to God. Today, the church should still be about the Father's business.

Luke's close parallels between this story and that of Samuel in our Old Testament reading are almost certainly intentional. Samuel was also the son of observant parents, and he served in the Temple. At the end of the reading, we are told that the boy Samuel 'continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people', just as we are told that Jesus 'increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour'.

These parallels are a pattern for us too. As we come to the beginning of a new calendar year, it is often a time to take stock, to make new year resolutions. Whilst there is little that many, or indeed any, of us can do about the piety of our parents, how might we serve God more faithfully in the coming year? How might we endeavour to grow in wisdom? How might we point more towards God's kingdom?

The Christmas carol, 'Go tell it on the mountain', which I often choose on the Sunday after Christmas, tells the Christmas story and exhorts us also to:

Go, tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.
... that Jesus Christ is born.