

A story of losing and finding

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Luke 2: 41-51— The boy Jesus in the Temple

On a pilgrimage like this we have the opportunity to share a lot of words (and they are very good words!) but we also need the opportunity for silence. In our very wordy modern world we often experience silence as something negative – a space to be filled (often by more words...) rather than something positive, something creative into which the Spirit of God might speak. This morning we are going to use word and silence together as we engage with the narrative of the Word.

I was very pleased when Fr Peter suggested this particular passage of scripture for this morning's meditation, and for two reasons. Firstly, because it is a passage which follows on directly from the passage on which I had the opportunity to preach yesterday. And the story of the child Jesus being brought to the Temple at the end of his childhood by his mother and father complements the story of the infant Jesus being brought by his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem, the story which we know as the Presentation of Jesus. But secondly because when I am not being a theologian (at least in the formal sense), my work as a medical ethicist, working particularly at the beginning and end of life, has brought me into contact with many families in whom the joy of finding and the fear of losing their child is an all too familiar reality.

I want us to begin, then, in a very Ignatian way of engaging with scripture, not with the head but with the heart, not de-constructing the narrative but rather entering into it, letting it flow round us, making it our own.

And that's important. When my two children, who are now young adults, were small and we were away on holiday, it was often my turn (as a typically absent clergy father, too often chairing church meetings or visiting at bedtime!) to read the bedtime story. On such occasions, they would often want me to set aside the story book and they would say, 'Tell us a story about when you were a little boy, tell us about Uncle Matthew and about what you did with your mummy and daddy...' And old, familiar stories would be repeated. They were nothing special, just the kind of stories which any one of us could tell about our childhoods, peopled with familiar characters in the everyday encounters of daily and family life. But that is precisely what gave these stories their potency – they were not 'made up' stories, they were 'real' stories and, even more importantly, they were *their* stories, stories they could *own*, because the story of my life is the story of their lives, the two are woven inextricably together.

And so it is with scripture. When we read the biblical narrative as Christians we are reading it as *our* story, a story in which we have a part because the story touches our lives and draws us into it. The story of God's grace at work in human history is the story of God's grace at work in our lives. It is both text and narrative but it is a living text and a living narrative in which we encounter both ourselves and God.



Read the passage through slowly and quietly twice. Now close your eyes, think of one moment in the story. Put yourself in the picture as one of the characters there. Imagine what it would be like to be that person.

See the place where you are in your mind's eye; where are the other characters standing? What can you see, hear, smell, feel around you...? Let the story flow around you. Now concentrate on your feelings as the story unfolds. What are your reactions? How do **you** feel?

Open your eyes. Sit quietly for a moment, breathe slowly and evenly. Now read the story through again. Do you notice any details you missed before? Has your perception of the story changed at all? If so, how?

Well, how did that feel? Of course, I don't know which character you chose – it might have been one of the Holy Family – Mary, or Joseph or even Our Lord Himself; it might have been a member of the family group with which they were travelling, a friend or relative perhaps; or it might have been one of the Jewish teachers, amazed when confronted with this extraordinary child; perhaps it was an un-named character – an orange-seller or trader whom these frantic parents question as they search for their lost child. So, each of you may have found that the story evoked different feelings.

But let me confess something to you... When I read that story, I feel sick! I feel like that because it reminds me of the time when I, too, lost a child (although, like Mary and Joseph, I found him again – not after three days but about half an hour).

We were on holiday by the seaside and some friends had come to join us for the day, adults and children all together, just like that story in St. Luke's gospel. At the end of the day as we walked back up through the sand dunes and into the car park, my wife and I looked at each other. Where was Tom? We had each assumed he was with the other as the children ran around on their way off the beach. With a growing sense of anxiety we retraced our steps; the coastguard was alerted and a Land-Rover sent to join the search. Just as they were about to scramble a helicopter, there was Tom, cool as you like, sitting on the beach. 'Why were you looking for me?' he asked, 'Didn't you know I'd be on the beach...' I can't tell you the emotions that ran through my heart and mind at that time....

So, here's a very human story, a story charged with human feelings and experience, feelings and experience that each of us know and own as our own. So, let's look a little deeper and see what is going on...

Setting the Context:

In Luke's gospel narrative there is now an abrupt jump from the time when Jesus is taken to the Temple in Jerusalem as a six week old infant and when we next see Jesus returning to Jerusalem at 12 years old prior to his *Bar Mitzvah* (becoming a 'son of the law') – his transition from childhood to adulthood with all the responsibilities which that brings. (**Note:** During the year preceding the 13th birthday, it was the duty of the father to prepare his son for the responsibilities he would assume on reaching adulthood.)

Of the intervening period we know nothing. Luke disposes of it in two verses (2:39-40):¹

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had finished doing all that was required by the law of the Lord, they returned to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong; he was full of wisdom, and God's blessings were upon him.

Most commentators see this passage as the end of the birth narratives but really we have here three periods rolled into one – **birth, infancy** and **childhood**.

So, when we next meet Jesus he is, in Jewish terms, standing on the brink of adulthood (which officially begins at the age of thirteen), able to accept for himself the responsibilities and obligations of adult life, not least in terms of participation in the worshipping life of the community.²

To mark this rite of passage, Joseph and Mary take Jesus up to Jerusalem and the Temple for the Passover as, according to Luke, they have done every year (there is no sense, then, that this is the first time that Jesus has been back since his infancy).³

Passover was one of the three annual festivals that Jewish men were required to keep in Jerusalem – the other two being **Pentecost** and the **Feast of Tabernacles** (although, in reality only Passover was generally kept in this way...). The city would be thronged with people, pilgrims who had

¹ Notions of the child Jesus working in Joseph's carpenter's shop are all speculation. Apocryphal books like the Gospel of Thomas attribute miracles to the child Jesus such as making pigeons out of clay, which miraculously came to life and flew away!

² The writer **Josephus** (*Ant.* 5.10,4: 348) draws parallels here with the beginning of **Samuel's** prophetic ministry – i.e. his call narrated in 1 Samuel 3: 3 up to his twelfth year.

³ Again, there are echoes of the **Samuel story** here with Elkanah and Hannah going up yearly to the sanctuary at Shiloh. See 1 Samuel 1: 3, 21; 2: 19.

come to the city for the seven-day festival period. Interestingly, we are told nothing about the festival period itself at all, the story really begins when the festival is over and everyone is making their way home. This was, as it was for the Holy family, often a considerable journey and those who had travelled long distances often travelled as an extended family group or party for company or protection (the journey to Jerusalem took them through the inhospitable territories of Samaria) – the word that Luke uses is simply **synodos** – those travelling together (ex-odos = a journey out, syn-odos = a journey with or together).

We are simply told that the boy Jesus stayed in Jerusalem and that his parents did not know this until they had journeyed for a whole day and then couldn't find him amongst their relatives.

One can only imagine how they felt at this point, a lost child (and Jesus is only 12 despite now being legally a man... Luke's use of the word **παῖς** – 'boy' emphasises this) is every parent's nightmare. So, they return to the city. By the time they arrive it has, of course, been 48 hours that Jesus has been missing (a day's journey out and a day's journey back). It's on the third day (and though we have a natural chronology here, note the significance of that in the death and resurrection narrative when Jesus is also, in a sense, 'lost' and 'found again' – Luke, in particular, associated the word **lost** with **being dead** and **being found** with **coming back to life again** cf. Luke 15: 32 – the story of the Prodigal) that they find Jesus in the Temple Portico, sitting with the Jewish teachers (probably on the floor at their feet, according to Jewish custom), listening to them and asking them questions (again, traditional Jewish practice – students would ask questions out of which religious teaching or dialogue would arise).

And, as so often, peoples' response to Jesus is **'amazement'** or **'astonishment'** (v 47).

Then we get, from Luke's pen, that little bit of dialogue between parents and child. Mary's response to finding Jesus is, reading it in English translation, quite mild...

⁴⁸His mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you."

The Greek word **ἀνέναντον** however, means to **feel sorrow** or to **suffer torment**, both physically and mentally. Does Luke intend his readers to catch a hint of **Simeon's prophecy** about Mary's coming pain here, the point of the sword already pressing home?

And Jesus' response, again at a first reading, can appear almost brutal (though this is a teenager speaking! – And note, too, that these are Jesus' first recorded words!)

⁴⁹He answered them, "Why did you have to look for me. Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" And Luke adds simply, ⁵⁰But they did not understand his answer.

These 'first words' of Jesus puts on the lips of Jesus an **implied statement about himself** – In some ways, here Jesus begins to discover who he really is.⁴

And the story then ends with the kind of brevity with which Luke has disposed of the rest of Jesus' childhood, but with the note of his **growth to maturity**, both intellectual and spiritual, and his **obedience** to his parents at its heart:

⁵¹So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and men.

In itself, this is a very human story. People are astonished or amazed by Jesus, but there is nothing in the story that is supernatural/miraculous here – it is the story of a lost boy who is found again by his parents!

And yet that is precisely where the heart of the story lies – Jesus, despite his youth, is no longer legally a child. Mary and Joseph now have to let go of the child and recognise the adolescent/man. In psychology and counselling, we would call this a '**developmental loss**' – the kind of 'letting go' or 'losing' that is a natural event in the life of any family; it's about '**transition**' or '**moving on**' but, like all losses, it has its painful side. Mary and Joseph have to recognise that their child has 'grown up'. And, for all parents, that is a 'two-edged sword' – pride and joy for the present and future, yet also sadness that, with the passing of childhood, the past is behind us as a new era begins and new relationships are being established and shaped and forged.

The words *in my father's house* and *about my father's business* whilst they do not deny Joseph his role, in an earthly sense, as father, or denigrate the home at Nazareth, nonetheless underscore this '**loosening**' of **human familial ties** as Jesus asserts his **destiny** as God's Son – This is where Jesus *naturally* feels he ought to be.

Nonetheless, Mary and Joseph are, perhaps understandably, perplexed at what this revelation of divine Sonship means and this is why, as Luke puts it, *They did not understand what he was saying*'. Mary, however, in a typically Lucan phrase *treasured all these things in her heart...* After all, she has known from the moment of the **Annunciation** that this is no ordinary child, but the child of God's promise and the ways of God are sometimes strange indeed! ⁵

⁴ Note the irony of Mary's question with *'your father and I..'* (i.e. Joseph) and Jesus' reply about *'my father's house/business'* (i.e. God) – the question of 'where does allegiance lie?' What does this say about those precocious teenage years when young people between childhood and adulthood are 'finding themselves'?

⁵ Note that one of the recurring themes in the gospels is that it is always difficult for people to understand who Jesus is.

But there is also the pain for Mary and Joseph of physically 'losing' Jesus.⁶

But even the joy of re-discovery is tempered by what seem almost cruel words on Jesus' part – 'Why did you think you had to come and look for me?' (Later in life Jesus will respond to the news that his mother and brothers are outside, looking for him with the words, 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers..?' – Again, these are not words about denying human family bonds but about broadening out the canvas..).

This, then, is **a story about losing and finding**, or even, in a sense, **about losing and finding and losing again!** It is a reminder that none of us can ever 'possess' another person and that true love consists as much in our ability to 'let go' as to 'hold'

Thus Luke ends his account of Jesus' infancy and childhood where he began it (and where he begins and will end his gospel), in the **Temple** and with a story which prefigures the Passion with Jesus making his way from Galilee to Jerusalem to fulfil his destiny with all the joy and the suffering which this will bring. And that is the unfolding story that is told in our Lenten journey as we travel with Jesus in the Way of the Cross.



Questions:

- ❖ What are the things on which we place most value in our lives?
- ❖ What do we fear losing that we struggle to hold onto in our lives?
- ❖ What is our vocation? What is it that we are being called to commit ourselves to? Where should our allegiance lie?
- ❖ What is one moment of insight in the story of Jesus and his parents and their visit to Jerusalem that we might take away with us and work on?

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⁶ One commentator (Luke Timothy Johnson) tries to soften the blow by saying that, of course, Jesus stayed behind through his own free will and not through any negligence on his parents' part – It's as though any sense of accusing the Holy Family of bad parenting is just not on! Another, (Howard Marshall) simply says, 'It is perhaps surprising that the parents should have travelled so far from Jerusalem without discovering that their child was missing...' (p.126) but, remember, this was an extended family group and there would have been nothing unusual about children moving about the group together.

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