



Luke 2:41–51

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among

their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' 49 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them. 51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them

and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Reflection

Today's passage is an intriguing little story about Jesus' adolescence. It's unique to Luke and is the only aspect of Jesus' life recorded between his infancy and the beginning of his public ministry at thirty or so. Let me read it to you from Luke 2:41–51,

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 Af-

ter the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have

been anxiously searching for you.’
49 ‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them. 51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Yesterday’s passage ended with these words from Luke,

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the

grace of God was on him.

Twelve years have passed. Jesus has grown and matured, he is filled with wisdom and the grace of God is on him even as a twelve-year old. And once more again today we see Mary and Joseph continue in their strict observance of Jewish traditions. Jewish males were obligated by the Torah (the law, written down by Moses in the first five books of the Bible) to attend the three major Jewish festivals: Passover, Pentecost (the Festival of Weeks) and Tabernacles (Exod 23:17; 34:23; Deut 16:16). Women and children were not required to attend, but many would travel to Jerusalem with their husbands.

At Passover, zealous Jews from all over the Mediterranean would descend on Je-

Jerusalem, its population and that of its surrounding towns and villages would swell many-fold. Jerusalem belonged not just to its Jewish residents but to all of Israel and so residents would open up their home, spare rooms, roofs, and courtyards to accommodate the huge influx of people. Passover was also the busiest week of the year for the Temple, in place of the usual single priestly division on duty were twenty-four divisions of priests, performing all manner of priestly duties but most especially the butchering of tens of thousands of lambs at the climax of the Passover festival in the space of a few hours.

And so this week Jerusalem, and in particular the Temple precinct, is a hive of activity. There's the Court of the Gentiles, filled to overflowing, inside that the Court

of Women, then the Court of Israel, the Holy of Holies, and the Most Holy Place. There's animal sacrifice, a bank, a depository for legal documents, a market where animals were purchased and money exchanged, a place for the Jewish ruling Council (the Sanhedrin) to meet, and various offices taking care of all aspects of Jewish religious and social life. With the whole City straining to contain the hustle and the bustle it is no surprise that at least one twelve year old boy becomes separated from his family.

Jesus had travelled in a large group of neighbours, relatives and friends from Nazareth to Jerusalem. For the young Jesus the excitement would have been tremendous. It may have been the first time he travelled to Jerusalem in anticipation

of the following year, his thirteenth birthday, when he would be counted a man and obligated to travel every year to Jewish festivals like these. Imagine the young Jesus seeing the Holy City for the first time, crowned with the Temple mount, and packed to the rafters with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims. We imagine his first experience of the Passover in Jerusalem, the grandeur, the priests, the Hallel Psalms, the joyous singing and Jewish nationalistic zeal, and the sacrifices in the Temple where heaven and earth were understood to meet.

Somehow, in the hustle and bustle as the greater part of Jerusalem leave to return to their hometown in Judea and Galilee or further afield, Jesus becomes separated from the large group he travelled into

Jerusalem with. No doubt children travelled with children, cousins playing with cousins while parents and other distant relatives were deep in conversation with each other – this routine well established on the trip in. We have the impression of a large and familiar enough group of people that it was not until evening that Mary and Joseph realised that Jesus was not with them.

Losing a child in a crowded place, even for a few moments is a terrifying experience that leaves your heart constricted in your chest. Frantic searching, all manner of horrifying thoughts running through your mind as maternal and paternal instincts take over – blaming yourself, getting angry at your child, sheer desperation tinged with panic and the urgent need to

find them and protect them as quickly as possible.

And so it is no wonder Mary's words to Jesus on finding him three days later in the Temple.

‘Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’

Mary's voice is flooded with guilt and relief, but also accusation. Clearly the young Jesus had had the presence of mind when separated from his parents to return to the Temple courts where he would be safe amongst the priests and where his parents would certainly return to look for him. While Mary's words accuse him (understandably, having spent two anxious

days searching for her firstborn) Jesus is guilty of no sin. And Mary's relief and anger at Jesus (which was for the greater part no doubt anger at herself for having lost him) soon gives way to astonishment, and Jesus' reply to her words is forever etched in her mind.

She finds Jesus sitting in the Temple courts not with other young boys of his age playing with stones but with esteemed teachers of Jewish law. It was normal for a Jewish rabbi to teach several apprentices who sat at their teacher's feet but we have the impression that the scene is reversed for the twelve-year old Jesus. Jesus sits amongst them, listening, asking, and answering questions, and those within earshot are amazed at his understanding and answers. For Mary and Joseph, relief and

mild anger give way to astonishment and Jesus' words leave an indelible mark on Mary's soul in particular, only to be fully appreciated later,

49 'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'

The new covenant, the new way of relating to God, is found in the heart of the old. His name is Jesus Christ. And as we've discussed over the last few days Luke is at pains to show his readers that this new religion that is sweeping the world is in fact not new at all. His Gospel begins with the Temple, it ends with the Temple, the first words of Jesus are today spoken in the Temple and the climax of Luke's Gospel, the death of Jesus, is marked by the

tearing of that dividing curtain in the Temple that opens up the way for new and direct relationship with God through Jesus. The new meeting place between God and humankind is here: no longer the Temple, but a person, Jesus Christ.

Think & Pray

Reflect today over how easy it is to get so caught up in religious practice that we lose Jesus. Mary and Joseph have observed all the law requires but have left Jesus behind. Think over your church routines and obligations and pray this morning with all your heart that a vibrant and living relationship with Jesus Christ would always characterize your walk with God; and not be left behind or crowded out by outward religious activity that hides an empty heart.