



Revd Ro's Reflection on 1st Sunday of Christmas 2021 Year C

Colossians 3.12-17

Luke 2.41-52

This year Christmas 1 is Boxing Day. Apparently the Royal Family open their gifts on Christmas Eve because of the incredibly busy schedule and because the Queen always attends two services on Christmas Day. It used to be the tradition that gifts were opened on Boxing Day, hence the name. In our house we open a few before the Spital Christmas service and the rest in the afternoon so that we can take our time. It is interesting to take just a few minutes to stop and think quietly of the gifts that have touched you in a special way over the years. Sometimes it may be a tiny present but the point is that these gifts are given with thought and love. Jesus was God's greatest gift to humanity, given freely and with love. Love is the hallmark of Jesus' life and indeed final sacrifice. It is that gift of love that we celebrate at Christmas, reflecting it in our gifts to each other. From the Christmas story we move on in our gospel reading to when Jesus is twelve years old.

A little while ago I was delighted to receive a book which my friend had found among her mother's possessions. It was dated 1933 and had the name of the original owner, incidentally another Davies, on the fly leaf. It is called 'Jesus the Carpenter of Nazareth' and it is a children's book, but children's books in 1933 were very different from now. I was fascinated in it from that respect but also I wanted to see how the author dealt with the childhood of Jesus when we know so little of it. The answer was simple. He was obviously a biblical scholar and an expert on the Holy Land. He could therefore give panoramic views of the countryside and tell us about Temple worship and many other details. Jesus' childhood is the story of the life of a typical boy in that time and place. He talks of Jesus learning the trade of a carpenter and what that would involve and tells us the details of daily life. It is fascinating and of course the details are accurate.

There are notable exceptions to the norm however and this is the wonder of Jesus, that holy child. We last saw him at his nativity with the first community of believers, the shepherds, who stared in

awe at the Messiah on that first Christmas Day. There follows the visit of the Magi and the tragic slaughter of the innocents as relayed in Matthew's gospel (chapter 2)

¹⁶ 'When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.'

The flight into Egypt follows, and eventually the family return to Nazareth where Joseph is able to take up his trade once more. However in Luke, there is no mention of the Magi, he does give us further details of Jesus' childhood. Firstly there is his presentation in the Temple.

²² 'When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord')

Once again this is a wonderful occurrence because old Simeon, who must have seen thousands of babies come to the Temple, recognises the significance of this child.

²⁶ 'It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus,'

As Simeon holds the child he says words that have been used in our services throughout history, known to us as the Nunc Dimittis. He knows as he holds the child in his arms that he is holding the Messiah, the one who will carry the sins of the world on his shoulders.

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

Notice that this takes place at the Temple in Jerusalem; we have also seen Zechariah receive the news of John's imminent birth from Gabriel as he went about his priestly duties in the Temple. Luke is concentrating on events in the Temple. Now having made no detailed mention of Jesus' childhood we see him again at the age of twelve, the age of manhood for a Jewish boy. Once again the focus is on the Temple. It is a very important passage in Luke's gospel.

It was a requirement under the law, that every Jewish male living within a fifteen mile radius of Jerusalem should attend the Temple for the great festival of Passover. It is the ambition of every Jew to go to Jerusalem for Passover at least once in a lifetime. I remember organising a Seder Meal for church and it ended with the words, 'Next time in Jerusalem.' We remember that Jesus ate his Last Supper at Passover in Jerusalem with his disciples. Now Jesus had reached manhood it would be his first journey as a 'son of the law.'

So he journeys to Jerusalem with his family. In the book I was telling you about, the author gives a detailed account of the journey and the rough terrain and dangerous road from Jericho. We mustn't suppose however that this journey would be like ours. Quite the opposite, extended families and friends would travel together; children would be quite safe mingling with their relations in the big

groups as they made for the Holy City. The group from Nazareth would have, in all probability, camped outside the city as Jerusalem itself would have been teeming with people.

Jesus would have spent Passover in Jerusalem going in and out of the city and the Temple with his parents. The white and golden Temple with its huge pillars must have been stunning, the ceremonies and the priests going about their work must have impressed the lad.

When it came time to leave, often the women in the large caravan would go first in the early morning and the men much later in the day, the two meeting at evening. This is how the mistake might have occurred, each secure in the thought that Jesus was safe with the other parent. So his parents, used to groups travelling together, assumed 'that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey.' It isn't until night that they look for him and realise he is not with the party.

I can remember the horror of getting lost on a day trip to Rhyl in my childhood. I must have been pretty small because I remember looking through the wire enclosure of the lost children's place! I will never forget the terror on mum's face caused by the agony of searching. It couldn't have been long but we never forgot that awful fear. Neither will I forget our joy after she found me!

That is exactly what Mary and Joseph must have felt when the horrific truth suddenly struck them. The boy was lost. If he was alone in a teeming city it was a very dangerous place, was he injured or lost somehow in the countryside? Words cannot describe how distraught they must have been.

They rush back to the city and search and search. It is three agonising days before they finally find him. Is this an epiphany moment, a realisation that this child is special? There have been clear signs about this child but now Jesus is acting for himself. Here he sits quite calmly among the wise teachers of the law, not as a precocious child but as an enquirer, wise beyond his years.

⁴⁶ 'After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.'

We are not astounded. The calm of Jesus is contrasted to the frantic worry of his parents, and scolding from Mary is so realistic. How typical those words are of someone who actually feels terrible at having lost him.

⁴⁸ '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.'

It is quite specific and the juxtaposition on Luke's part of the words 'father' is deliberate. Jesus is totally calm and here is the moment of revelation. Joseph is his earthly guardian but Jesus only has one father that is God and now he knows it. This is the moment of clarification.

'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he said to them.'

Mary and Joseph are human and the mists are slow to lift. Mary even at the beginning of his ministry seems mystified. Looking at the familiar stories in the gospel, the annunciation, the birth, the words of Simeon and Anna, we find this hard to comprehend but,

⁵¹Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.'

A long time passes between these signs and, though Mary may 'treasure things in her heart', there is no full understanding yet. He is a normal and obedient lad for many years to come.

Now things begin to become clear to Jesus himself. For us it is a very significant event. Jesus, at this Passover, as he reaches manhood, realises just who he is. He knows who his Father is and gradually he will fulfil this Father's will, ordained from the beginning of time.

From the Holy Family we turn to a church family in our reading from Colossians three. This sentence 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.' should echo through our reading from Colossians. Paul is telling these early Christians to model their lives on Jesus. He understands what makes a secure community and he knows what can destroy it. He knows what sort of behaviour they experience in the society which surrounds them, the society they belong to. That is no longer acceptable; 'turn from sin and turn to Christ' is the message here.

¹² 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.'

It is worth looking carefully at each of these attributes, notice which ones Paul puts first, kindness and compassion. This echoes Jesus' new commandment, 'love one another as I have loved you.' He goes on to cite humility and meekness. There is nothing weak about these things. Often it takes real courage to show them, think of these words, 'He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.' Think what counter cultural behaviour Paul is asking for, all this in the light of the persecution that the new Christians will face.

Paul stresses forgiveness, which is not the same as condoning what is wrong. Jesus once again is the supreme example, 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' If someone does wrong the church must deal with it but must do so in love. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.'

Love is the keynote; it must govern all they do. It is tough to be a Christian, forgiving and loving those we find it hard to love is a tough ask but Jesus asks it of us. We cannot preach the gospel message unless we try to live it and we must be aware when we fall short. Once again we have the word 'peace' which echoes throughout the scriptures,

¹⁵ 'And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. '

This is 'the peace of God that surpasses all understanding,' the peace that infuses body, mind and spirit. This is the peace that gives strength, whatever we have to face. The peace that Jesus gave to the first disciples in the upper room should infuse all Christian communities. This is what Paul wants for them. So we have the picture of the earliest Christian community in worship.

¹⁶ '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. ¹⁷And whatever you do,

in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'

They would of course have been using the Jewish scriptures and singing the familiar psalms, though Christian songs of praise were being used. Look how the key notes are joy, worship and thanks. Paul is quite clear, whatever you do, do it in the name of Jesus.

That is a good guide for us all in our daily lives. Whatever you do, do it in the name of Jesus, really thinking, is this what he would want us to do?

'Hail the heav'n born Prince of peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings.'

Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Martin Madan and others.

~~~~~