

29th December 2024: Luke 2:41-52 – ‘Our childhood’s pattern’

1. *Once in royal David's city, Stood a lowly cattle shed, Where a mother laid her Baby, In a manger for His bed: Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little Child. (So far, so good)*

3. *And through all His wondrous childhood He would honour and obey, Love and watch the lowly maiden, In whose gentle arms He lay: Christian children all must be Mild, obedient, good as He.*

4. *For he is our childhood's pattern; Day by day, like us He grew; He was little, weak and helpless, Tears and smiles like us He knew; And He feeleth for our sadness, And He shareth in our gladness.*

Is it just me, or do any of you have difficulty recognising the Jesus you think you worship in much of that? I mean, there are some nice touches: I like the emphasis on his humanity: ‘He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us He knew.’ And no doubt Jesus was obedient – our passage says as much. But all that stuff about being mild, and sitting around passively watching his mum – is that the sort of Jesus we see later in the gospels?

Don’t get me wrong, I love carols, it’s been wonderful to sing them again this year – but when you look at some of the words... some of this one sounds like a way of enforcing the Victorian idea of childhood on their children. ‘Christian children all must be Mild, obedient, good as He.’ I must confess, in a whimsical moment I wrote another verse for Once in Royal, it goes like this:

*And he went off to the temple, Left his mum and dad behind
Gave them all a fearful terror, Nearly drove them out their mind
To the question: ‘Why’d you do it?’ / ‘Father’s house,’ as if they knew it.*

But it’s not really ‘mild’ enough, really, is it?

Anyway, back to the text. This is one of those unique stories in the gospels isn’t it? Apart from this one story, the entire history of Jesus’ life from his birth till he turns 30 is silent: one theologian comments: ‘It is as if the evangelists had agreed to respect the privacy of the Holy Family, and to allow the child to grow into the man undisturbed by our curiosity.’ I like that. So, we just have this one hugely significant snippet to go on, when the 12-year-old Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover. We don’t know if it’s his first visit: many commentators think it is, though v41 also tells us that his parents visited every year, and I find it hard to imagine that a devoted mother like Mary would leave Jesus for at least 2 weeks every time – 100 miles walking from Nazareth to Jerusalem and back.

But it is a significant moment because Jesus had turned 12: the age when a boy became a man in Jewish society, when he became ‘a son of the law’. So here is Jesus, serving his first apprenticeship as a son of the law, learning from the teachers of the day. Enjoying it so much, in fact, that he stays and gets caught up in it. Perhaps the fact he did so suggests he was aware of his change in status upon reaching the age of 12; perhaps it was his first visit and he was just enjoying it so much. Either way, he stayed, and the large party from Nazareth leaves without him.

I guess nowadays social services would have been involved in what happens next – thankfully in those days extended families and kindred ties meant that children grew up in much larger and more secure family communities, meaning that parents didn’t always have to keep an eye on their kids. Nevertheless, this oversight leads to an agonising 3 days as they first travel the day back to Jerusalem, and then a further day or more searching desperately for their son.

Finally they find him, sitting at the feet of the nation’s premier religious teachers – like any good apprentice – and we hear Jesus earliest recorded words. More on that later. But what can we take out of this story? Well, what I’ll do is give you 3 alternative sermon titles for this passage and say a few words on each. Perhaps one of them will grab you and touch your heart today.

Here's the first: **The New Samuel**. One thing you must never believe about the gospels is that they were primitive accounts written by unsophisticated ancient types. If you were writing a definitive account of the one thing you'd staked your life on, you'd probably take that pretty seriously, and in fact the gospels are very highly crafted, and full of resonances and references to the Old Testament. In this case, Luke is hinting to us quite clearly that Jesus is the new Samuel.

For example, both Jesus and John the Baptist are miraculously conceived, just like Samuel. Mary's song in ch1 picks up themes directly from Hannah's (Samuel's mum's) song in 1 Samuel 2. The last verse about Jesus growing up is just like the equivalent in Samuel's story...

...and then there's the temple setting: what happens to Samuel after Hannah's song? He gets called by God in the temple. What happens here at Jerusalem? Now there's no direct call for Jesus like there was for Samuel, but this is the first place that Jesus himself vocalises his identity. After his encounter with God, Samuel knew he had a special role in the life of Israel. After this Feast of Passover the 12-year-old Jesus also knew: (v49b) 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'

The fact that Luke wants us to make the connection begs the question: what role did Samuel play in the life of Israel? Samuel was the man who cleaned things up after the chaos of the Judges. Samuel restored the worshipping life of his people, saw the ark returned to Israel and provided probably the only moment when God's plan of ruling his people directly actually worked.

So Jesus is the new Samuel. Which means he is powerfully anointed. It means he is restoring the life of his people after generations of decay. And above all, God is once again coming to rule his people directly. It's not just a boy getting lost, it's hugely significant. There's a bigger picture at play here. Perhaps your resolution for 2025 might be to invest in grasping that bigger picture of your faith?

Second title: **Finding the Jesus you thought you'd lost**. Tom Wright spots the parallel between this story and the Road to Emmaus, as Jesus meets 2 disciples who'd 'lost' Jesus 2 days previously. He suggests this title for both: 'Finding the Jesus you thought you'd lost'. That's nice, isn't it.

And maybe that's you as well? One of the glorious riches of the gospel is precisely that Jesus is so hard to fit into a box. He's always bigger, and that partly what keeps life with him as such an adventure. But it also means that sometimes we may 'lose' Jesus, he so confounds our expectations that we need to go and find him again, and not stop until we do. If that's you, perhaps that might be your resolution for 2025: to find Jesus again. The good news is that if somehow we've lost him, he has *never* lost us.

The third: **Discovering your true Father**. This is really the heart of the story, isn't it? His parents eventually find him and Mary blurts out: (v48b) 'Your Father and I have been anxiously searching for you!' Jesus' reply is hugely significant, especially because they are his earliest recorded words – and what he does is transfer the parental role from Joseph to God: 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' Joseph is not my ultimate father, Jesus is saying. I know who my Father is, and it's God. The *12-year-old Jesus* understands this. Almost 20 years before his public anointing by the Spirit and the voice of God at his baptism, Jesus knows his divine identity.

And of course what Luke makes clear later in his gospel is that his relationship to God can be passed on to us. It's why the prayer we say every week, or every day, still retains its power: 'Our Father...'

So, to return to where we started: 'For he is our childhood's pattern.' What does this really mean? Ultimately, the real clue is in Jesus' words to his parents. **The great journey of our lives is to know God as our true divine parent, to know that we are his beloved children.** It may take us much longer to grasp this, well beyond our childhood. I think I only really grasped it as deeply as I should when I became a parent myself. It's never too late to make that journey. So, as we feast on this lovely story today, may the Lord grant us all grace to hear its meaning. And may we continue to dwell in our heavenly Father's house today and every day, drawing strength from his deep wells of love and grace. Amen.