

Christmas 1
30/12/2012

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 2:18 – 20, 26

Psalm 148

Colossians 3:12 - 17

Luke 2:41 - 52

This snapshot: no optional extra

For a long time the infancy stories were regarded as optional extras in relation to the Gospels. The early chapters of Luke's Gospel were seen as "pleasant overtures" that provided a setting for the main drama that was to come. But further attention has shown that these stories are essential to Luke's project. They form a bridge between the time of the Prophetic promises and the actual drama of Jesus' life [I owe many thoughts in what follows to Brendan Byrne *The hospitality of God* pp 31-38.] They ground the fulfilment of God's promises in the ordinariness of human realities but the more you investigate the stories, the more they line up with the central proclamation of the Good News.

If you think of the four Gospels as photo albums filled with snapshots representing different aspects of the life of an individual, the only picture we have of Jesus that gives us glimpse of his life in between his birth and his Baptism by John is this one of him as a 12 year old. It is unique to Luke, and it forms a bridge between childhood and the commencement of his ministry. If this is part of Luke's "pleasant overture", then the notes struck here later return in chords of deeper resonance because the events that unfolded had their roots in Jesus' early life.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem because his parents were lawful citizens. And they were observant. Everything shows they practiced their faith within the continuing traditions of Israel. They had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day and presented him at the Temple. They made annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem to attend the Passover festival. It was during the visit they made when Jesus was 12 that they lost him, because he chose to stay behind. His age and his choice are significant. A Jewish boy of 12 has reached the threshold of manhood. This is the point where he casts off being a passive infant, and prepares to accept responsibility for keeping the Law. Luke is telling us something when at this age and stage Jesus was lost to his parents, and three days later was found in the Temple, arguing with the scholars.

Luke is fond of the theme of lost and found. The theme of joy at the recovery of something cherished is connected with Luke's artistry on the subject of salvation. He tells stories of coins that are lost and found, and stray sheep that are recovered. Prodigal sons are lost, declared dead, then found to be alive, and become the source of great rejoicing.

To move between being lost and found is to experience death and life. This is true for the loser, as well as the lost. The boy Jesus was lost to his parents in Jerusalem at the Passover, and found "after three days". Don't underrate the reference. Death and life are alluded to here – and Luke intends to make a connection between this and the events of another Passover, years later.

The finding of Jesus probably brought joy to his parents, but the text concentrates on their anxiety and hostility at his lack of proper respect. There is a double irony here. Firstly, it is Mary who speaks, and refers to Joseph, not name, but as Jesus' 'father'. Ironically, this is the first time Jesus speaks in the Gospel the words of his reply are to be weighed carefully: "Why are you searching for me? Did you not know I must be in my Father's house [about my Father's business]?" We read what he says as dismissive, even scornful, of their concerned parental relationship, and Joseph is gazumped by what he says. And there is an imperative here. Some suggest the wording should read as: "it is necessary to be in my Father's house [about my Father's business]".

Much later, the same sense comes through in another conversation, on the road to Emmaus when the risen Christ says to the two travellers: *..how foolish you are and slow to believe, was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer...* [Lk 24:26]. He is speaking to two people, perhaps a man and a woman, who are slow to understand, and he is teaching them something, which is hard to grasp about the nature of the Messiah. Compare this with Chapter 2 in which he is speaking to two people, a man and a woman who find it hard to grasp the meaning of his vocation. Luke shows even those closest to Jesus did not comprehend the meaning of his life. Although Luke says Jesus later went home and "was obedient" to his parents his first spoken words sound a note that Luke repeats in his teachings on discipleship: "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple*". [Lk 14:26]

When Mary and Joseph found Jesus in Jerusalem, they thought they were losing their son to scholarly religious discourse. Ironically, what was really happening was they were losing him to God. Although they found him in Jerusalem he became lost to them in an entirely new way, and perhaps it was then that Mary began to feel the edge of the sword that would later pass through her soul.

It is one of the subtleties of Luke's text to suggest Mary did understand. She kept things in her heart and pondered them. These words are echoed on Easter morning. The women who came to the tomb "remembered [Jesus'] words"[Lk 24:8]. What they discovered, as did the two on the road to Emmaus, was that Jesus, lost to them in Jerusalem for three days at Passover, was found again. And even though they had to grapple with meaning of this, Easter morning became the source of abounding joy because, three days after the worst imaginable outcome they came in search of Jesus. It was then they discovered something almost impossible to compute: he had come in search of them. And he invited them to live an entirely new life in which he would be present to them, to the end of the age.

A little boy lost at Christmas would be a sad thing. But his lost-ness was a step on the way towards God's great work of finding us, and embracing us with a gift of inestimable value. Jesus' lost-ness was part of God's own loss, suffered to give us the gift of self-giving love. Love that offers hope in all our lost-ness, providing us with the foundation for an entirely new vision of life. Thanks be to God.
