

Jesus at the Temple

Young People

Luke 2.41-52

Jesus' staying behind in the Temple is unplanned; there is no strategy here, just his overwhelming desire to be about his Father's business. In verse 49, the words sometimes translated 'I must be in my Father's house' really mean: 'I must be in whatever has to do with my Father' – this is a young lad who is completely bound up in the love of God, which is what he wants to do most of all. So his parents' leaving him behind in Jerusalem – which looks like a massive safeguarding failure – is not a problem from Jesus' point of view; he is soaking up the atmosphere of God in the Temple.

He does this by asking and answering questions, a method which is fundamental to the Jewish way of learning. Jesus has a hunger to know more of God, which he feeds from scriptural study. In the Temple at Jerusalem with the doctors of the law, he is in the right place with the right people. He knows where to look for the truth of God. Like many Jewish people throughout the ages, he is thirsty for religious knowledge – it was once said of the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, each with its house of study at the heart of its little village (*shtetl*) that they were 'drunk on knowledge of scripture in the way that other nations are drunk on alcohol'.

Jesus at the time of this story is 12 years old. That is one year younger than the age of the *bar-mitzvah*, when at 13 a Jewish boy is expected to take the law upon himself, and to demonstrate his readiness for that by reciting from Torah without any memory aids. But Jesus is so knowledgeable and so enthusiastic that he will not wait for any age limit; nothing can impede this young person's avid devotion. And Luke tells us that his example has an impact on all those around him: they are 'amazed at his understanding and answers' (47).

There is a sense of compulsion and of directness in Jesus' relationship with God his Father., which must take priority over everything else. So in verse 49, he insists that I *must* be in my Father's house – it is a strong word which is used here, and he is surprised that others do not understand the force of devotion which he feels. Sometimes young people can feel just like this, with a very clear and forceful sense of spirituality. I see this in teenagers sometimes, and I can recall it in my own youth too – adolescence may be a turbulent and uncertain time, and deep doubt can co-exist with strong faith, but the things of the spirit matter more than anything else to young people.

As he is reunited with Mary and Joseph, Luke makes clear that there is an awkward meeting. This is vividly portrayed in Simone Martini's great painting of 'Jesus at the age of twelve' which hangs in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. There is pain on all sides here, and as Jesus

returns home it begins to be clear that his vocation will separate him from Mary, his mother, and from Joseph, who is not really his father.

Note that at this point Mary in fact reprovingly speaks of Joseph as 'your father' to her son, but he responds by talking about 'my (real) Father', God. The call of God can be hurtful of even the best family relations. So this episode finishes with Jesus back in Nazareth, obedient to his parents, the family reunited; but as we think of this scene, we know things can never be the same again.

The unfolding of the gospel story sees tensions grow between Jesus and his family. And we in our own generation need to make space for young people to find faith and to follow faith in their own way, not only as part of a family unit. This story shows how Jesus comes to own his faith for himself, how that affects his family, but also how it impacts on all those around him, as he grows 'in divine and human favour'.

Can we recognise the power of young people's sense of God, which speaks directly to them?

What impact do they make on those around them?