

The boy Jesus at the Temple

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 30 December 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 2:41-end

Many years ago when our children were quite small, we were on holiday at a time that coincided with the local county show, so we thought we'd go along. It was a very hot August day and tens of thousands of other people had had exactly the same idea. But we had a great time looking at all the stalls and going on rides and admiring the livestock and the latest agricultural hardware. And by about four o'clock we'd had enough and decided we needed to head back to the car. On the way we passed a children's book stall where there seemed to be some real bargains.

So we stopped for a browse. And after five minutes, Sue suddenly looked up and said, "Where's Nell?" And we looked around and realised we could only account for three of our four children. There were crowds of people streaming past; you couldn't see more than five paces in any direction and our daughter was only three or four years old. Sue said, "Right. You stay here in case she shows up. I'll go back to that balloon stall where she wanted a balloon and see if she's there". So I stood with three rather frightened small children while Sue rushed off into the crowd.

Nell's elder sister Lucy looked at me and said in a very practical tone of voice, "Is Nell lost forever?" And all sorts of terrible thoughts flowed through my mind. And after a few minutes Sue came back empty-handed. By now we were getting seriously worried. Nell was too little to navigate herself around the showground and there was no P.A. system to tell lost children where to go or indeed lost parents come to that. So we thought for lack of a better idea we will just go on a bit further in case she's wandered ahead.

A few hundred yards further on the crowds thinned and there, thankfully, was our youngest daughter. Tearful, but being consoled with a bag of chips offered by a very kind couple who had very sensibly decided they were just going to stand still until

Mummy and Daddy showed up. Parents will recognise the overwhelming emotions of relief on the one hand and guilt and anger on the other, which accompanies such occasions.

And I was about to deal with that by lecturing my daughter on the importance of keeping her eyes fixed on mummy and daddy in a crowd, when it transpired that the reason she had walked on past the book stall in the first place when the rest of us had stopped, was because she had been following a man in the crowd who had the same coloured jacket as me. She got lost precisely because she thought she was following her dad. And on reflection, whose responsibility is it to keep an eye on whom? So I can sympathise with Mary and Joseph, losing Jesus at a festival. Not just for ten minutes, but for three days. And we can identify with Mary and Joseph when in their mixture of relief and guilt at finally finding Jesus again, they give in to the instincts to tick him off: "Child Why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." And we can picture the situation entirely from Mary and Joseph's point of view.

But on reflection the same question applies. Whose responsibility is it to keep an eye on whom? Surely Mary and Joseph should have been keeping track of where Jesus was and not just assuming he was somewhere in the group. And Jesus's reply rather makes that point. "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" Or more literally, "Did you not know that I must be about my father's business or seeing to my father's interests?" In other words, "I didn't lose you. You lost me. And if you'd thought for a moment you would have known where I was."

So this story of parents losing their child raises the question, "Who are the ones who have really got lost here?" Because Jesus shows no sign at all of being lost. He's entirely composed and at home in the temple debating with the teachers.

His wisdom and maturity are emphasised by the verses topping and tailing this story which begins with us being told that the child grew and became strong and filled with wisdom and the favour of God was with him, and then at the end of the story we're told that Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour. Clearly this child is the one to keep an eye on: don't assume that you are the centre of his

attention; rather make sure that he is the centre of your attention. That way, nobody gets lost.

Actually, this isn't the only story in Luke's Gospel about people losing Jesus. There's this story near the beginning and there's a second near the end of the Gospel, when another pair of people who love Jesus find themselves on a road leading away from Jerusalem at the time of the Passover festival, thinking that after three days they have lost him forever. There's even an echo of that first story in the wording: in this story, the child Jesus says, "It was necessary for me to be about my father's work." And to the disciples on the road to Emmaus he says, "It was necessary that these things had to happen, that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory."

So in both stories people are distraught at the thought that they have lost Jesus. In both stories when they find Jesus again, they discover that he isn't quite the person they had thought he was. He's elusive, mysterious, unpredictably free, and when he allows himself to be recognised, there is surprise and cause for wonder.

o perhaps this is a story for those of us who think that we've domesticated Jesus, who think that he's predictable. And surely at Christmas time there is a real risk of that, when Jesus easily becomes just another ornament of the season, like the angel pinned on top of the Christmas tree. We can be so immersed in our Christmas traditions and celebrations that we lose sight of the real saviour of the world, the one born in poverty and obscurity but in whom all the fullness of the godhead dwells: that Jesus resists being sentimentalised; that Jesus isn't our passive possession, but will break out against our expectations.

There are times when we are very like Mary and Joseph in failing to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, so that we think we've lost him. And it's very easy to do that when life is crowded and full of distractions: when things are difficult and pressures build up; when things don't work out as planned and we feel helpless and blown off course; when crises flare up so that our world closes in and all our energy goes into just getting through the next day and managing the immediate needs. And then we can be horrified to discover that Jesus isn't where we thought he was, that our faith isn't the support we'd hoped it

would be because we've allowed our focus to drift off somewhere else and allowed our priorities to become different from his priorities, with the result that we suddenly look up in panic and look around for him. But he doesn't seem to be there. And when that happens perhaps our response needs to be just like that of Mary and Joseph, to look for the Lord wholeheartedly, because it's not until you think you've lost the child that you realise just how important they are: they retraced their steps to go back and look for Jesus.

And perhaps we need to go back to the point when we last knew he was with us: to dwell in that place in our imaginations in order to rekindle our love for him; perhaps we need to turn off the computer or the TV, and reopen our Bible and spend time with it; to spend time in silent prayer; to make a point of counting our blessings through each day; to give thanks for so much that we take for granted; to practise praising God and indeed to make more of an effort to seek His will for our lives and consciously to submit our wills to his; to walk again in the paths that once led into his presence, and see if we don't find him where he always was before, about his Father's business which he invites you and me to be involved in also.

Seeking the presence of the Lord Jesus may take us away from the temple and back to the stable but always it will take us to Jesus.

So let me encourage you in this Christmas aftermath: To seek Jesus so that you may find God. Find God and your life will be filled with a stronger sense of God's purpose for you. And having found him you need never fear being lost again.