

Stirrings of divinity: Sunday, December 31

Luke 2:41-52

December 13, 2000

This has to be the censored version! What parents would leave a crowded city—one that was not their home—and journey a whole day without noting that their child was missing? Today they would be charged with child neglect. What 12-year-old from a loving home would calmly detach from his parents, enter the portals of probably the most daunting building in the city, and be found three days later in solemn debate with theologians of note? And then, what Jewish momma, finding her missing child after three days, would simply be “astonished”? Can you imagine her saying in polite Aramaic, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously.” Give me a break!

Of course, the language of the Bible is decorous about many things that we express in a much more “in your face” manner these days, so how Mary really said it will have to remain veiled. I think we can safely assume, however, that Jesus didn’t use this episode as the model for his best-loved parable, with its touching climax, “This my son was lost, and is found!” It doesn’t surprise me at all that when he went back with them to Nazareth, he “was obedient to them.”

But even if we get a sanitized version of the domestic dynamics, these verses have to be precious because they are the only record of the childhood of Jesus anywhere in scripture, and Luke has something more in mind.

In the telling of this event, it may be that he is helping us work with some of the mystery of who Jesus was. All of the Gospel writers, in their own way, wrestle with this. The author of John’s Gospel, whose profound and poetic prologue we love so dearly, may have taken the easier path; he shrouds the incarnation with the awe and mystery of the “Word made flesh, come to dwell among us.” While he reminds us that Jesus was the light which enlightens every person coming into the world, the way it all happened is left wonderfully vague.

Luke, however, is determined that the Jesus we encounter in his Gospel is one whose humanity cannot be disputed. For Luke, as for Matthew, it is important to locate Jesus's birth in circumstances of place and time that anchor him in Israel's history. His genealogy (in Matthew) and his close family (in Luke) are important markers of his humanity. Luke's Jesus begins life in surroundings that are grubby, poor and human, with two very human parents.

We should never forget this. It is all too easy to distance Jesus to a position beyond the boundaries of our humanity. I notice that many preachers these days avoid the name *Jesus*, but refer to him always as "Christ" or "the Christ," almost as if using his real name would make him too much like us. I understand that title and revere it, but interestingly, none of the Gospel writers—not even John, to whom it would surely have come most naturally—uses it widely. "Jesus" is the Gospel name for this very human Nazarene.

Jesus is also the name for God!

The birth we celebrate is nothing less than God coming to dwell among mortals (Rev. 21:3). We cannot fathom the mystery of incarnation, nor can we tether it with bonds of rational argument. It is more than we can ever know. All we can do is to offer our awe and worship in its presence, as Charles Wesley did:

Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine
The incarnate Deity;
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.

This is our confession of faith, and the language of worship remains our only way to speak this mystery.

If we struggle with Jesus's being "fully human and fully God," it should not be surprising if the Jesus child wrestled with his identity too. We do not know when the first intimations and stirrings of divinity within his humanness made themselves felt, but given who Jesus was, and what he would have to give his life to, it is inevitable that such moments would come. We can imagine him beginning to yearn for some confirmation, some touch of his other, eternal home.

Later, at his baptism, he would receive signs of special kinship with the Father, but here, at a mere 12 years, we can imagine his heart leaping when he saw the temple. His parents went to Jerusalem every year for Passover, surely a great adventure for the youngster. We can imagine the young Jesus, like Samuel centuries before, being powerfully moved by this holy place in which Yahweh dwelt. Each year he would have heard the story of Israel's liberation retold, and seen the sacrifice made. We can imagine a sense growing inside him of identification with that sacrifice, and a need to explore more and more of its meaning for himself. Without understanding it all, maybe we can see how he would have been drawn to the temple's portals and its learned men. This, surely, was where the most important meanings of his life would be found.

“Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?”

We are told that while Mary and Joseph didn't understand at the time, “his mother kept all these things in her heart.” She knew this Jesus child was only loaned to her.

We too must work out who we are, not by birth, but by God's generous grace. The most important discovery we can make is to find that our identity is bound up with the one whom Jesus called “Father.” Even more important—when our children demonstrate that sense of holiness and awe which speaks of God, the best gift we can give them is to “lose” them to its embrace. They are, after all, only loaned to us.