

**Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC**  
**11.00am Morning Prayer**  
**First Sunday of Christmas [29 December 2024]**

readings: 1 Samuel 2. 18-20, 26; Luke 2. 41-end

It will no doubt be obvious to most of you that the Gospels have almost nothing to say about Jesus from the time of his birth at Bethlehem until his emergence as a preacher and teacher thirty years later. There is a noteworthy absence of detail about his childhood and the years of his coming of age. The one exception, of course, is the short but memorable episode we've just heard, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (2. 41-end). But why, we may ask, is this story included to the exclusion of all else? The implication is that otherwise, Jesus's upbringing has been, and will continue to be, uneventful: as the passage says, he goes on to increase 'in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man' (v.52). Yet it's also clear that a particular point is in fact being made, not least because the imagery and language of this story are plainly indebted to the passage we've also heard from the First Book of Samuel. Although Jesus's parents don't dedicate him to service in the Temple the way that Samuel's parents do, as with Samuel, the Temple serves for Jesus as a natural habitation, the dwelling-place for anyone who regards 'home' as that place where God may be looked for and ultimately located as one's own Father.

Still, the difference between Samuel being offered up to the Lord in gratitude for his birth and Jesus remaining at the Temple even after his parents have departed – this is a basic difference we shouldn't ignore. Hannah's decision to place Samuel in the care of Eli as soon as he's weaned is indeed a far cry from Mary and Joseph frantically looking for Jesus after he's gone missing. For like Samson before him (Judges 13), Samuel is a Nazirite, one set apart and consecrated as 'holy unto God' (Num 6.5). His life is framed in terms of a legal structure that has long revolved around ritual notions of purity and impurity, sacrifice and satisfaction. And, as today's passage makes clear, this system will give the parents of Samuel more children year on year as a direct reward for offering up their firstborn (v.20). Evidently no such promises have been made to the parents of Jesus, who, having made their annual pilgrimage at Passover, expect little more than to return home under the same conditions under which they've arrived. The surprise and hurt that Mary and Joseph display when they eventually locate their son at the Temple suggest this is an act of disobedience seriously out of character. Nor can there be any easy answer to Jesus's astonishing words when Mary confronts him: 'How is it that you sought me?' he asks. 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' (vv.48-9). Here the intricate pattern of religious observance and social order has not so much been ignored as completely turned back on itself. Or, to put it another way, it's precisely in the name of a greater and still more intense love for God that Jesus defies the norms of family and society that are assumed to be essential in the commitment to God.

If we approach it this way, then, we see why this episode in the life of the young Jesus is critical in the development of the Gospel narrative. Because it shows him at once fully shaped by his Jewish identity and culture and context, while also being entirely able and willing to challenge it. And this readiness to break with custom in order to come still closer to God will, of course, be a central theme in all of Jesus's subsequent teaching. It's a theme and an attitude that has its roots in the prophetic tradition, a vision of people who draw near to God not merely through external piety but through an internal devotion. It's the vision that God has of his people and expresses through the prophet Jeremiah, when he determines that 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (31.33). This is the vision that Jesus will himself make explicit when early on in his ministry he asserts: 'think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matt 5.17). It is in this spirit that the disciples will shortly be invited to leave behind their friends and family, they will be permitted to violate the Sabbath, they will be encouraged to dine with sinners, and eventually, expected to share the Good News of Jesus far beyond the limits of their own community.

And all this, we should understand, does not begin out of nowhere, but rather proceeds out of the deep and abiding hunger for holiness within the Hebrew tradition, even as it reimagines the very nature and purpose of this holiness. It begins with the longing for God within the heart of a twelve year old boy, wise beyond his years, wise beyond the reckoning all those around him. It begins and finds its fulfillment with the longing experienced by each of us who comes here today, into the house of God, looking for intimacy with God. Not because we have been put here by someone else or ended up here merely through habit or custom, but because we seek the One whom we call Father. And it is the Father's will that we should seek him constantly, until this and every house of God does in fact become a home to us, a place where we are renewed and refreshed and then sent forth again, ready and able to testify to that law which has been written on our hearts.