

Losing Jesus

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26, Luke 2:41-52

30 December 2018

In the world of modern communications, text messages, tweets, etc., there are a lot of initials being used, which are quite obvious to those who are using them, but may leave the rest of us slightly baffled. I know that O.M.G. means „Oh my God“, but probably that’s the extent of my knowledge of these things (which, I’m afraid rather betrays my age!). But recently, I have learnt another one: J.M.J. and it, apparently, stands for ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph’, the Holy Family as they are known in religious circles.

Well, in certain Christian traditions today, the Sunday after Christmas is known as The Feast of the Holy Family, the feast of J.M.J. In our tradition we do not observe this as a particular day, but in a sense, it is quite an appropriate name as we are still very much basking in the Christmas glow, which of course, is widely celebrated as a time for families. We travel far and wide to be with our families for Christmas if we are lucky enough to have them and many good people and worthy organisations are doing their best to create a family atmosphere for those who do not have access to their own families. I trust that one way or another you all had the chance to celebrate with people, whom you love and/or respect and that you have caught something of the infectious joy of the special Birthday we have marked over the past week. But, now it is all over for another year and we are in the period between high days and ordinary days.

In our Gospel reading today we find Jesus and his family in similar mode, although by the vagaries of the Lectionary, we have suddenly fast-forwarded twelve years from Bethlehem. They have just celebrated one of the great annual religious festivals in Jerusalem and now they are on their way back to ‘normality’, to pick up the pieces of their ordinary, everyday lives, just as we are after our festivities. Their journey would have required a lot of preparations, again, just like our own getting ready for Christmas. The days of travel there and back had to be planned; accommodation booked for the days there, food sorted out for the duration, liaising had to be done with the people you would be travelling with. What to wear, what to take, what to pack, whom to include in the party, these would be the questions occupying their

minds in the lead up to the journey, but now it was done until the next time. Everyone can relax.

It has been a great occasion, all righteousness has been fulfilled. They are still probably quite elated, excitedly discussing the highs and lows of the big event. How good it was to see the neighbour’ son, who joined them after many years’ of absence! Wasn’t the worship magnificent in the Temple? Didn’t the priests do well coping with all the pilgrims gathering for the occasion? Wasn’t it lovely to see the children and so well behaved? Oh, and by the way, where is the boy Jesus? Has anyone seen him recently? Friends and neighbours are being questioned, but nobody knows where he is, no one has seen him since they left Jerusalem.

Just before Christmas I came across a 12 point advice on how to achieve the ideal celebration, a ‘perfect Christmas’. Most of the points were pretty obvious, but a couple of them struck a chord: ‘avoid family drama’ and ‘try not to stress!’ I don’t know how well you have managed to avoid family drama and stress in your celebrations, but it seems Jesus’ parents could not manage it because Jesus upset the apple-cart! The Holy Family had been thrown into turmoil.

We can be thankful to the gospel writer who (alone among the evangelists) included this story about Jesus’ childhood. Luke’s purpose was probably quite simple: to illustrate that the human Jesus, who grew up to be the long awaited Saviour, had already shown signs of exceptional qualities even in his teen-age years. For, as we heard in our reading the would-be Saviour was lost and eventually found in the Temple, of all places, discussing deep theological issues with the religious experts. But today we are going to think about another aspect of the story: what did it mean, what does it mean to lose Jesus in the very context of religious activities? And when we put it like that, posing the question at our last Sunday worship of the year, we may find that this story could be just what we, good Christians and regular, faithful worshippers need to hear at this point.

For Jesus’ family this was not the only occasion when they lost him. In Mark’s Gospel there is a rather uncomfortable incident recorded (Mark 3:21), when the grown-up Jesus, now in his thirties, is being sought by his family, who think he is ‘out of his mind’ for going on the road and preaching. And then finally, all too soon his

family and friends and all who knew him, would lose him, seemingly for good to the most cruel death on a cross.

As we look at the exchange between the young Jesus and his parents after having found him 'on the third day', we realise that we also know something about the temptation of losing sight of Jesus and what he stands for just when we are most engaged on God's business. How easy it is to forget about him, when great church issues occupy our minds, when we plan the perfect festival service or the carol service. When life becomes tough, or, we simply get too busy and 'more important issues' are jockeying for our attention, like problems with church heating and misbehaving organs? We can lose him even without noticing it and go happily without him for quite a while. And once we realise that he is not there we can blame him, 'why has he done this to us?' We can sulk, we can keep our distance and nurture our disappointment and even stay in that state for years. Or, like Jesus' parents, we can go and search for him, until we do find him again.

Back in Jerusalem, the first thing we notice is that for Jesus *the God-question is not finished, just because the festivities are over*. His family probably worked tirelessly to prepare everything for the perfect pilgrimage, but now that it was done, they are moving away from the place of worship. For Jesus the great communal worship seems only the start of his personal quest. For him there are a lot more to discuss, to learn, to argue, to discover. As we conclude another year's worth of worship here, at our church and are getting ready for the New Year, perhaps we can learn from him this thirst for more knowledge, more experience, more practice in our relationship with God. For *'The Lord has yet more light and truth to bring forth from His word'* as the old Congregational hymn has it.

Then we notice that Jesus' worried parents spend two days looking for Jesus *in the wrong places*. Jesus is not where they think he is. It is only on the third day that it occurs to them, as a last resort, to look for him in the Temple. Perhaps they are looking for him in the wrong places because they don't really know who he is and what occupies his mind. They used to know him before but today he is different. The result of all the listening and learning and questioning in the Temple has taught this teenager something precious about God and about himself. There is a higher authority than parents or priests (but don't tell our children or our ministers!) and he, as a mere teenager is called to be far more than he dared to dream of

becoming. We can have the same problem as Jesus' parents when we think we know all we need to know about Jesus and consequently are looking for him in the wrong places. Jesus is The One we never had not an independent idol, or anybody's personal possession, he is one, who, here, with his very first adult decision ties himself inextricably to God, whom he experiences as his heavenly Father.

So, we cannot cling to Jesus without taking the whole 'package' with him, as it were. Bill Loader, the Australian theologian draws attention to the fact that the gospel writers didn't worry about not knowing the personal life of the child Jesus, or of the adult Jesus, for that matter. For them Jesus wasn't a celebrity in our 21st c understanding. A celebrity who is there to be poked about and prodded for the smallest details of their private lives. For them the Gospel wasn't a personality but an event in and through that person. He summarizes his conclusions this way: *"Christology was never meant to eclipse theology"*. Luke, the Gospel writer indicates that from this time on, Jesus is not just the son of Mary and Joseph. And we are to take it too that he is not merely our personal Saviour, though we may be grateful that he is that too. But, he is about God's business, which is much wider and encompasses the whole world with particular reference to those we would rather forget.

And finally this bitter-sweet reunion highlights the fact that Jesus does not feel lost at all. The way he answers his parents is not merely the opinion of a precocious child, but the words of one, who, in spite of what everyone else thinks, knows that he is not lost. He knows who he is and where he needs to be. *If anyone is lost in this story, it is the frantic parents*, who do not know where to turn, whom to blame, what to do. As we look back on our past year and planning the New one, we may take it to heart that when it feels like Jesus is missing from our life, it is not him, who is lost, it is us. We may be in the wrong place, we may be the ones who need finding and then we may give thanks that if we re-trace our steps, he will join us again and go with us. We need him as a constant reminder and an upholding presence in our quest to find a closer walk with God. With these thoughts and prayers I wish for all of us a hopeful and rewarding New Year. Let it be so.

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