

Young Jesus in Jerusalem **(Luke 2:41-52)**

‘The hidden years,’ we call them, the thirty years between our Lord’s infancy and the beginning of his ministry, marked by his baptism at the hand of John. They are hidden, not because Jesus’ life was lived under a shroud of secrecy, but simply because the four Gospels tell us almost nothing about them. I say ‘almost,’ of course, because St. Luke gives us one brief glimpse.

Where the Scriptures are silent, however, legends abound. One is inclined to say, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” The extra-canonical Gospels tend to fill in the gap with fanciful tales, as we said last week. Not to dwell on it, there is the story of the child Jesus and his companions playing with clay doves, when the one in his hands comes to life and flies away, giving Mary the occasion to admonish the other children that they should render Jesus due obedience. Such fabrications, like those we cited last week in connection with the journey of the Holy Family to Egypt, suppose the exercise of supernatural powers by the young lad, not altogether unlike the youthful deeds of the fictional Superman, who lifted locomotives and such.

The one incident recorded in the Gospels, where the curtain is lifted briefly, is of a very different nature, for its focus is not so much on his divinity as on his humanity, albeit his unique humanity.¹ The passage immediately preceding, which told of the previous visit to Jerusalem at the purification, forty days after his birth, concludes by saying, “And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned unto Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (2:39-40). The focus there is on Jesus’ development as a child and his growth in wisdom and grace. That theme continues in the passage read today.

¹ “In itself the story is a natural one, and does not include any supernatural features which might lead to skeptical estimates of its historicity” (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 126); “A single incident from the boyhood of Jesus illustrates his ‘growth in wisdom’ (vv. 40, 52)” (John Martin Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* [London: Macmillan, 1930], p. 43).

Our text opens with the statement that Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. These trips, like the earlier one at the purification, were as prescribed by the Law (Exod. 12:15-16; Lev. 23:6-8; Deut. 16:3). Later we are told that Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth "as his custom was" (4:16). The whole pattern of Jesus' life was as prescribed by Jewish Law.

It was when he was twelve years old, on the cusp of manhood as understood in those days and ready to assume adult responsibilities before the Jewish Law that Mary and Joseph took Jesus with them to the Passover. It may have been the first time he had left home, the humble house and shop in Nazareth, where, as Papini put it, "the hammer pounded and the rasp scraped until the setting of the sun."² It was a journey of some 75 miles and they would set out on the journey with a crowd of their neighbors, for all of the men were required to go and many of the women and older children went as well. The journey south to Jerusalem may have taken four days, for about twenty miles was considered a day's journey. As they neared Jerusalem and began the climb, the ascent of the last miles, they would have sung psalms, the so-called Psalms of Degrees or Ascent (Pss. 120-134), psalms especially related to the Passover, psalms that recalled the state of the children of Israel in Egyptian bondage and the great deliverance by God in the Exodus. Passover not only reminded them of God's deliverance past, but framed their hope for deliverance future.

Henry Ward Beecher's great homiletical skills captured well the picture of the pilgrimage. He wrote,

At twelve, the Jewish children were reckoned in the congregation and made their appearance at the great annual feasts. Roads were unknown. Along paths, on foot,--the feeble carried upon mules,--the people made their way by easy stages toward the beloved city. At each step newcomers fell into the ever-swelling stream. Relatives met one another, friends renewed acquaintances, and strangers soon lost strangeness in hospitable company. . . . They sang their sacred songs at morning and evening, and on the way. Thus one might hear the last notes of one chant dying in the valley as the first note of another rose upon the hill, and song answered to song, and echoed all along the pleasant way.

We can imagine group after group coming at evening into the valley of Samaria,--guarded by [Mt.] Gerizim and [Mt.] Ebal,--beginning to feel the

² Giovanni Papini, *Life of Christ*, trans. by Dorothy Canfield Fisher (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), p. 32.

presence of those mountain forms which continue all the way to Jerusalem, and chanting these words:--

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
From whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord,
Which made heaven and earth.

Refreshed by sleep, breaking up their simple camp, the mingled throng at early morning start forth again. A voice is heard chanting a psalm. It is caught up by others. The whole region resounds. And these are the words:--

I was glad when they said unto me,
Let us go into the house of the Lord.
Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem!³

They arrived just in time for the great feast. Our text tells us nothing of the celebration of the Passover, as it tells us nothing of the journey to Jerusalem, but we can well imagine something of the impact of the feast upon young Jesus, who would have heard the story of the exodus repeatedly in synagogue and home. But although he may have mentally visualized the celebration of the Passover, the visceral experience must have had a much more profound impact. I expect that he was somewhat taken aback by the actual slaying of the Paschal lamb, not so much because it involved the killing of an animal—they lived very close to such things in those days—but by the profound spiritual impact of the sacrifice, the symbolic significance of a lamb dying that a people might be delivered . . . from bondage . . . and from sin.

As I said, we are told nothing of Jesus' experience of the Temple services, but I think Alfred Plummer was surely correct when he said, "The attraction of divine things held him fast in spite of the departure of his parents."⁴ Mary and Joseph left, undoubtedly assuming that he was with the other young men in the large company, but he was absorbed with spiritual matters, sensing a significance in the ritual even deeper than that perceived by others. This was of far greater importance for him than attending to travel arrangements.

When the caravan stopped for the first night's rest, Jesus could not be found. Joseph and Mary searched for him tent by tent, all in vain, and started back to Jerusalem early the next morning. Again Papini captures the scene, focusing on Mary,

³ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1871), pp. 70-72.

⁴ *A Critical and exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke (I.C.C.)*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), p. 76.

The next morning the mother turned back, retraced her steps over the road and went up and down the streets and open places of Jerusalem, fixing her dark eyes on every boy she met, asking the mothers standing in the open doors, begging her countrymen not yet gone, to help her find her lost son. A mother who has lost her son does not rest until she had found him; she thinks no more of herself, she does not feel weariness, effort, hunger. She does not shake the dust from her clothes nor arrange her hair. She cares not for the curious glances of the passers-by. Her distracted eyes see nothing but the image of him who is no longer beside her.

Finally on the third day she came to the Temple, looked about the courts, and saw at last in the shadow of a portico a group of old men talking. She came up timidly, for those men with long cloaks and long beards seemed people of importance who would pay no attention to a plain woman from Galilee, and discovered in the center of the circle the waving hair, the shining eyes, the tanned face, the fresh lips of her Jesus. Those old men were talking with her son of the Law and the Prophets. They were asking Him questions and He was answering; He put questions to them in His turn and they marveled at Him, astonished that a boy should know the words of the Lord so well. But He remembered the books which He had heard read out in the little Synagogue of Nazareth: and His memory had retained every syllable.

Mary remained for a few moments gazing at Him, hardly believing her eyes. Her heart, a moment before beating fast with fear, was now beating fast with astonishment. But she could not restrain herself any more and suddenly in a loud voice called Him by name. The old men took themselves off and the mother snatched her son to her breast and silently clasped Him to her, the tears which she had kept back till then raining down on His face.⁵

I think Papini captures it as well as any and better than most, at least as seen through Mary's eyes. We might back up a moment, however, to add a thought or two. First, regarding the doctors who were teaching there in the Temple. Alfred Plummer speculates, not unreasonably, that there might have been distinguished personages among them, such as old Simeon (though I doubt that), Gamaliel, Annas, Caiaphas, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea⁶—an interesting thought, though we don't know.

It is more pertinent to observe the twelve year old in their midst. Jesus answered their questions, and posed some to them in the manner of the time. He was deeply thoughtful. His mind was keen, and his questions sharp. Beecher observed, "Christ's

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

questions were always like spears that pierced the joints of the harness. It seems that even so early he had begun to wield his weapons.”⁷

We need to be careful here, however, and note that Jesus’ answers and questions, while impressing the teachers by their keenness and perspicacity, are not put forward as being supernatural in any way. Though Jesus will be described repeatedly in this Gospel as ‘teacher,’ he is not so described here.⁸ This is important because many critics, including those of the well-known Jesus Seminar, reject this passage as an innovation of the Evangelist on the ground that “Luke follows the convention of Hellenistic biography by including an episode from Jesus’ youth that confirms the portents that accompanied his birth. These portents forecast the unusual career he is destined to have.”⁹ But Jesus is not portrayed here as a Wunderkind, as commentators as far back as St. John Chrysostom¹⁰ have noted. Even David Friedrich Strauss, the grandfather of skeptical research into the historical Jesus, doubted that the text implied that Jesus played the part of teacher.¹¹ Jesus is here more the star pupil than teacher, but so much the bright student that the teachers, we are told, were “astonished,” even as we are told earlier in this chapter that those who heard the shepherd relate their story of that night of nights, and that Mary and Joseph on hearing the words of old Simeon, were “astonished” (vv. 18 & 33).

That was how Mary and Joseph found Jesus at the end of three days’ search, engaged in the Temple precincts exploring with the teachers the meaning of the great acts and promises of God. Was he beginning to sense his place in this unfolding plan of redemption?

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 474.

⁹ *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New Translation and Commentary by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 276.

¹⁰ “The Lord performed no Miracles in His Childhood. Luke however discloses this single event, through which he is seen to be astounding” (Chrysostom, *Hom. 20 in John*, quoted in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, Vol. One [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000], p. 237). I. H. Marshall introduces his commentary on our text thusly, “A story which tells of the unusual ability of a boy destined for a great future, or of the early insight of a future religious teacher, inevitably finds parallels in various cultures, even down to the detail of the boy being twelve years old. Bultmann . . . lists: Moses . . . ; Josephus . . . ; Cyrus . . . ; Alexander . . . ; Apollonius . . . ; Si Osiris; and Buddha. There is nothing surprising about such parallels; even today accounts of great men will devote attention to their precociousness (or lack of it!). Hence these parallels cannot be used to show that the story in Lk. is legendary, but only that the motif is a common one” (*Op. cit.*, pp. 125-126).

¹¹ *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. by George Eliot; ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), p. 192.

When Mary and Joseph came upon the scene, that was the end of the discussion. Mary, flushed with anguish and relief, rebuked him gently, “Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.” Jesus replied with a gentle correction, “How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?”¹²

Two things come to the fore. First, that Jesus has, of necessity, a higher allegiance than to his parents, namely to God who is in a more profound sense his true Father. In these first recorded words of Jesus, we see a growing consciousness of a filial relationship to God, a consciousness that will be fully disclosed at his baptism 18 years hence, when the voice from heaven will proclaim, “This is my beloved Son.” Now we need not suppose, his human nature being genuine, that Jesus fully understood all that was revealed about him at his birth, but he knew that his highest obligation and deepest responsibility was to God, whom he already regarded with tender intimacy as ‘his Father.’ Second, with this knowledge there is a deep and undeniable certainty that there is something which he ‘must’ do, an inescapable ‘ought’ that will drive his life, he whose meat will be to do his Father’s will. Two chapters later Luke will record Jesus’ words, “*I must* preach the good news of the kingdom of God . . . I was sent *for this purpose*” (4:43). This sense of divine mission was growing in him already: “I must be about my father’s business.”

We are told that Mary and Joseph did not understand this saying of Jesus. How could they? But Jesus reply was not only hard to understand, it was simply hard. Guardini says, “In that hour Mary must have begun to comprehend Simeon’s prophecy, ‘And thy own soul a sword shall pierce’ (Luke 2:35).”¹³ François Mauriac takes the thought further, noting that

Mary’s predestined spirit, enlightened since the beginning, accepted that which the poor woman did not understand. Nevertheless, these words of her son must have seemed hard to her. Yet did her Ieschou ever say kind words to her until just before the end, when he spoke from the height of the cross?

Luke assures us that Jesus was submissive to his parents. He does not add that he was ever tender with them. None of the words of Christ to his

¹² Or “in my Father’s house.” See I. Howard Marshall, *Op. cit.*, p. 129; Raymond E. Brown, *Op. cit.*, pp. 475-477.

¹³ Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954), p. 10.

mother related in the Gospels (except the last) but show his hard independence of the woman; as if he had made use of her for his incarnation, and having issued from her flesh, there was apparently no longer anything in common between him and her. To those who one day were to say to him, “Thy mother and thy brethren are standing without, seeking to speak with thee . . .” he replied, “Who is my mother and my brethren! For whosoever doth the will of my Father who is in the heavens, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

This at least is certain: the child of twelve spoke to her without kindness, as if he wished to mark the distance between them; suddenly he was like a stranger. Mary knew this had to be. Besides, a pressure of the hand, a look, is enough for a mother to know she is loved; and this mother felt the constant presence of her Son within her. She never had to lose him, never having ceased to bear him in her heart. Christ had all eternity in which to glorify his mother in the flesh. Here below, perhaps he sometimes treated her as he still does his chosen ones whom he has marked for holiness and who, behind their grilles, in their cells, or in the midst of the world, know all the appearances of abandon, of being forsaken, not without keeping the interior certainty of being his elect and beloved.¹⁴

That’s an interesting thought, though I prefer not to read such severity into Jesus’ words. However, they clearly did distance him from his parents.

We are told that Mary kept all these things in her heart. J.A. Findlay comments that “we could wish she had been more communicative”! Romano Guardini is better: “Not understanding she buries the words like precious seed within her. The incident is typical: a mother’s vision is unequal to that of her son, but her heart, like chosen ground, is deep enough to sustain the highest tree.”¹⁵ The Venerable Bede wrote similarly, “Mary, mother of wisdom, [was] the pupil of her Son. . . . Nothing of what was said or done by him fell idly on her mind. . . . That which she beheld at the present, she waits to have revealed with greater clarity in the future.”¹⁶

Mary appears but once more in Luke’s Gospel, in the same scene to which Mauriac referred earlier where Jesus said, “My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:19 ff.). Joseph is not seen again. He dies offstage before the hidden years are over. The poet, John Lynch, wrote of him, remembering the scene in the Temple,

¹⁴ François Mauriac, *Life of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937), pp. 23-24.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture [ACCS]*, ed. Thomas C. Oden, *New Testament*, Vol. III, *Luke*, ed. by Arthur A. Just, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), p. 55.

The words that moved again across his mind,
 The sight of masters standing, and the air
 They had of reverence, these are the sum
 For Him of miracles. This was to be
 The end of all he'd see of signs and wonders
 And the growth of Him; he is to have
 No seat at Cana's table, and the place
 Of resurrection shall not find him glad.

This is the end. His fingers will not close
 Upon the thorns, nor will the wounds be scarred
 Upon his eyes. This is the end, and after
 This we will not find him on the page
 That tells of her. Joseph walks a road
 And brings them home; he will be waiting there
 A while, and for a little he will speak
 Directions and be heard, and he will guide
 Young hands in building scaffolds and the beams
 And doors much smaller that He's builded once
 Of space. But he will see no more than this.
 And walking now, his gospel has been heard.¹⁷

And so we are through with this brief raising of the curtain on Jesus' hidden years. It is a precious scene, brief as it is, and one we cannot forget. It haunts us, somehow, with its story of Jesus lost and found. We seek him still, and the story has many a lesson for us. Origen said,

In the company of the throng my Jesus cannot be found. Learn where those who seek Him will find Him; that you, seeking with Mary and Joseph, may find Him. And *seeking Him*, says the Evangelist, *they found Him in the Temple*. Not anywhere, but in the Temple. And not simply in the Temple, but sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions. Do you therefore seek Him in the Temple of God: seek Him in the Church: seek Him among the teachers who are in the Temple, and do not depart from it. If you so seek Him you will find Him.¹⁸

Mary and Joseph, we are told, found him *after three days*. St. Ambrose couldn't help but see here an analogy to the resurrection. He wrote, "It is sure a sign that he who was believed dead for our faith would rise again after three days from his triumphal passion and appear on his heavenly throne with divine honor."¹⁹

¹⁷ John W. Lynch, from *A Woman Wrapped in Silence*, in *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*, ed. by Robert Atwan, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. I, p. 242.

¹⁹ ACCS, *Luke*, p. 54.

I also like what Papini says, the words he puts into the mouth of Jesus, and with these we shall bring these reflections to a close:

How is it that you sought me? Do you not know that I can never be lost, that I can never be lost by anyone, even those who will bury me under the earth? I will be everywhere where anyone believes in me, even if they do not see me with their eyes. I cannot be lost from any man, by any man, provided that he hold me in his heart. I shall not be lost in the desert nor alone on the waters of the lake, nor alone in the garden of olives, nor alone in the tomb.²⁰

No, he cannot be lost. It is we, poor wandering sheep, that get lost. Let it be all our care to find him, and having found him to keep him in our hearts forever, and, like Mary, to ponder again and again all his words and all his deeds.

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²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 34.