

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY | 30.12.18

I have long found today's Gospel story (St Luke 2: 41f) 'difficult'. Not because it doesn't feel very 'real' – adolescent children do tend to treat their parents as if they are really rather stupid - but because we don't somehow imagine that Jesus would treat his parents like that.

It is, of course, the only story in the Gospels to tell us anything at all about Jesus between the birth narratives in Bethlehem and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt after the episode with the Three Kings and the beginning of his ministry when he calls the disciples away from mending their nets by the lakeside. But however one reads this story, there is quite a dark under-toe. Something here doesn't quite feel right.

The background is straightforward enough. From the age of thirteen all males were required to take on full adult responsibilities so at twelve this story of Jesus represents his first introduction to a life punctuated by the three major feasts: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. At these times the priests and scribes would gather together on the steps of the Temple to teach and to answer questions. Of course in hindsight we know that these are the very steps Jesus will later teach his disciples on - and where the chief priests will try to arrest him too.

Last night the family went to the 'Screen on the Green' to see the re-make of *Mary Poppins*. While Emily Blunt is a pretty good *Mary Poppins*, the lyrics by Scott Wittman are too contrived for words and the music by Marc Shaiman (famous for *Hairspray*) is utterly unmemorable.

The script is a bit better and there is one line that stood out for me. Michael Banks, now a father of three, is hopelessly at sea after the early death of his wife. There are papers everywhere and he isn't able to get on top of things – at home or at work. *Mary Poppins'* arrival of course changes everything and after a lesson in the Poppins philosophy of life in the children's nursery, they face Michael in the drawing room. He is sitting on a rather low chair so he is forced to look up to them as they stand rather nervously in front of their new nanny. In some despair, he says wistfully: *and when, exactly, did you learn to be so wise?*

Most of us can remember that difficult period in all our lives when we were still at home but were ready to leave for the next phase of our lives. It is the time when we know we know considerably more about things than our parents and have often developed very different opinions about a whole range of things including politics, money and the appropriate time to come home at night! These – and much more besides – are a challenge for both sides.

This is the situation for Jesus and Mary. And it isn't actually about intelligence or maturity. What his parents were having to cope with was Jesus' growing realisation of his relationship with God, a new closeness fashioned by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not just a run-of-the-mill 'Son of God' like us: he is the Messiah.

Mary and Joseph could do nothing but watch and wait as Jesus began this process of self-realisation, this new relationship with new rules and new uncertainties.

This week Sr Wendy Becket died. Known to millions of people via her programmes on TV, she was instantly recognisable – with her old fashioned black nun's habit, her buck teeth and her utterly winsome enthusiasm. As many experts have recognized, she was probably the most perceptive art critic of the last twenty years – with a wonderful ability to help non specialists appreciate the work that she was drawing their attention to.

But she was also an enclosed nun, based in a convent in Norfolk where she spent the vast majority of her time, in silence. And it was out of her silent reflections that she wrote, in 2002, her 'Spiritual Letters'. Her written style is a bit hard to understand at first hearing so I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing her words so that you can enjoy her message this morning. She says:

God is always coming to teach us new things. And he comes through life's experiences, exactly as they are. Sadly for us he does not come in pre-packaged forms which make it easy; he comes in peculiar and unexpected moments – as he chooses.

If we look for him in certain religious ways we will only ever see a fraction of what is on offer. That is because we have a natural tendency to define and control what we are receiving. We want a foothold into the experience to avoid being confused.

But God's glory doesn't work within our limitations. It is he who sets the boundaries and who provides the agenda so that he, not us, can build the relationship. Knowing God has to be on his terms.

Of course that is very frustrating for us as we see how our nice pious ways are destroyed by his overwhelming presence. But if we can let go of the places and ways of meeting with him, we will begin to experience him as he really is – and experience things that our romantic imagination could never envisage. He has to empty out our innocent but misguided ways of exploring who God is so that he can fill us up with the reality of who he really is.

He is trying to do this with us, all the time. All we have to do in cooperate...

That is what Mary had to learn in Temple. She had to see her normal ways of relating to Jesus taken apart and carted away before the real Jesus could come and transform her understanding.

We think of Jesus words in the Temple as hurtful and adolescent. Perhaps he didn't realise what he was saying as he sat amongst all those intelligent teachers. We might even imagine that, somehow, the situation had gone to his head.

But if we think that we have missed the point. What Jesus was doing was helping his parents understand a new reality, the emerging purpose of his life. They were to be the first witnesses to the start of Jesus' long journey - to the Cross and to the Resurrection, this pilgrimage of total obedience to the will of his Father.

That, and not the hurt, is what Mary pondered in her heart. And yet, with Michael Banks she may well have also asked, *and when, exactly, did you learn to be so wise?*