

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

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Today is often called the Feast of the Holy Family as it is the Sunday after we have celebrated the birth of Jesus and so, logically, we are thinking of Mary, Jesus and Joseph. The Gospel passage set for today gives us Luke's account of the visit of the family to the Temple in Jerusalem when the young boy Jesus was 12 years old.

By way of background, we are also given a brief excerpt from the story of the boy Samuel living in the Temple at Shiloh about 1,000 years before Jesus' birth. There are interesting parallels between the two stories as well as differences. Hannah, one of the wives of Elkanah, was barren and prayed for a child. God gave her a son whom she named Samuel. She offers a song that is similar to the song of Mary as she shared her joy in God's action.

Samuel is "lent to the Lord" and becomes the servant of the Prophet Eli in the Temple who trains him to hear the voice of God. The snippet we get today is about the boy serving God in the Temple which relates to the account of Jesus in the Temple. Interestingly, it is Samuel as a wise old Prophet who anoints David to be King of Israel, and Jesus is a descendant of David through his mother Mary.

The regular family trip to the Temple, and act of faithfulness on the part of Mary and Joseph, occurs again and again. We hear of the trip when Jesus was 12 and by what we read it happened in much the same way as it had done in the past except for one critical thing. As they left Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus was not with the company travelling. Three days of anxious searching led them back to the Temple where they found him. It is important for us to understand that this was not carelessness on the part of his parents. The Gospel tells us "*the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem*". [Luke 2.43]

Jesus deliberately stayed. It is little wonder then that Mary chides him "*Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.*" [Luke 2.48] The language used here is not simply of worry, it is of grief-stricken agony and fear that her child was lost. His response to his mother seems surprising "*Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*" [Luke 2.49] This needs to be unpacked a little:

- "*I must ...*" – this is the language of a divine mandate, the essential requirement placed upon him.

- “... *in my Father’s house*” – a curious phrase attempting to translate words that are very difficult to put into English. Here we understand these words as a place (which, here, is the temple) or as a group of people (in this instance, the teachers) or as an activity (the business or affairs of the Father). But it is perhaps most helpful (although not workable in a written translation!) to leave it open, to think of it as all the **somethings**—places, people, doings—that advance the purposes of God’s love for the world.

These are the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel and from them we gain a much broader sense of his purpose and mission. It begins in the Temple and comes to its finality in the same Temple from which he is taken to Pilate and sentenced to crucifixion. We can see the parallel between the three days of agonising search by his parents before rejoicing that he was found and the three days of waiting after his death before the joy of resurrection is revealed.

The significance of Jesus’ interaction with the teachers in the Temple and his words to them are not fully understood by his parents, but there are two things that come from this encounter:

1. Jesus “*was obedient to them*”, he stayed with them and continued live just as we all do in a family environment, until he was ready to fulfil his mission.
2. “*His mother treasured all these things in her heart.*” [Luke 2.51] Mary knew that his life mattered even if she could not comprehend how or why. She trusted that whatever was to come was in God’s hands.

What we see here is that this child, who is still being cared for and nurtured by his parents, is already aware of the overarching call of God. Like the inbreaking of heavenly glory in a pasture, directing the shepherds to a manger, and the angelic praise pointing to both heaven and Earth, Jesus will always hold both the glory and the flesh in himself as son of humanity and Son of God.