

Holy Family 2006 (Year C)

Luke 2:41-end (Finding of Jesus in the Temple)

This Advent and Christmas we have spent a lot of time thinking about what scholars call the “infancy narratives” in the gospels. The story of the finding of Jesus in the temple which we heard this morning is in some ways the last of those narratives. It is the only story in any of the canonical gospels which tells us something about Jesus between his being a baby and his adult life. It is not, of course, about “infancy” strictly speaking since Jesus is twelve, but it concludes the series of tales which began with the conception of John the Baptist, and which lead up to the adult ministry and preaching of John as well as of Jesus.

The early Christians were very fond of stories about the child Jesus. The texts which came to be called “Apocryphal gospels” contain lots of narratives about Jesus at play, or learning to read, or performing childhood miracles. In one important respect, our passage from Luke shares their theme. Consider for example this story from the so called “Infancy Gospel of Thomas” (not to be confused with the other “Gospel of Thomas”, a much earlier document which contains sayings of the adult Jesus). Jesus is here talking to his teacher:

"Believe me, teacher, what my father told you is true. (5)I am the Lord of these people and I'm present with you and have been born among you and am with you. (6)I know where you've come from and how many years you'll live. I swear to you, teacher, I existed when you were born. If you wish to be a perfect teacher, listen to me and I'll teach you a wisdom that no one else knows except for me and the one who sent me to you. (9)The Jews who were standing by and heard Jesus marvelled and said, "How strange and paradoxical! This child is barely five years old and yet he says such things. (10)Jesus said to them in reply, "Are you really so amazed? Rather, consider what I've said to you. The truth is that I also know when you were born, and your parents, and I announce this paradox to you: when the world was created, I existed along with the one who sent me to you."

We have all met precocious children, and all doubtless resisted the temptation to clout them over the head, a temptation to which this teacher gives in. But I suspect that claiming to be the pre-existent Son of God is beyond even the pupils of the Dragon School.

The theme is wisdom. The Greek and Jewish world of the gospels is a world in which wisdom is a distinct and creative power, a power with which Jesus is identified by a number of New Testament writers. Luke in

his story is making a less explicit claim. Something very surprising is taking place – a twelve year old boy is talking with the scribes and they are amazed at what he is saying. But we have none of the miraculous party tricks of the apocryphal gospels, and none of the oracular sayings which make those stories so much less vivid than those that Luke himself gives us. His emphasis is on people – on Jesus’ parents, on the teachers of the law, and on the young boy himself.

In fact, I think we ought to consider this story not as belonging simply with the tales of birth and childhood which Christmas hears over and over again, but as continuing a process of questioning which the gospel begins at its outset. Luke starts, remember, with Zechariah and the conception of John the Baptist. That story is sandwiched around the tale of the annunciation to Mary, and then the birth of John immediately precedes the familiar tales of census, shepherds, presentation and then this morning’s finding. Many are inclined to stop there. But if we read on, we find that the first description of adult life in Luke is, again, about John the Baptist. His preaching and ministry prefigure that of Jesus, just as his conception and birth prefigured Jesus’ own. As if to make the point doubly clear, Luke then follows immediately with the story of Jesus’ own baptism, the first point at which Jesus and John come together since the baby leapt in Elizabeth’s womb to acknowledge the presence of his Lord. Here again John publicly attests to the superiority of Jesus, whose

identity is then confirmed from heaven. Luke hammers the point home by choosing at this juncture, after Jesus’ adulthood has begun, to list his genealogy, to tell us, in one sense, who he is.

But what of the temple? It is a recurrent theme in Luke, who is concerned to mark the passing from the physical temple, destroyed before he wrote, to a personal temple in the presence of God manifested in Jesus Christ. The story of the finding in the temple shows a Jesus filled with wisdom, growing to adulthood, challenging even those who know him best. Luke goes out of his way to tell us that his parents did not understand what he was saying. They, like all his disciples, have to grow into that understanding, have to be led into the knowledge of Jesus’ identity. The place to begin, perhaps, is that temple and that presence, and so as to remind us of that, the story of Jesus’ temptations, which follow his baptism and precede what we usually call his ministry, end in Luke not with the offer of the kingdoms of the world in return for worshipping Satan, but with the challenge to throw himself off the temple edge.

In fact, Luke’s narrative begins with Zechariah in the temple, and ends with the disciples in the temple. The infancy stories begin in the temple, and end there with the presentation. The preparation of the adult Jesus for his ministry climaxes on top of the temple. Our gospel this morning is the centre-piece of these early stories, chronologically central since it

shows Jesus in early adolescence, and central in narrative sandwiched between the preparation which takes place in childhood and the beginning of Jesus adult life. As such it provides a climax to all that preparation, all that making ready for the ministry of Jesus which will move towards the climax of Jerusalem and the cross. This morning's gospel sets us up for all which is to follow, for it contains something crucial: Did you not know that I must be in my father's house, or perhaps about my father's business, it does not matter: if you would look for me, Jesus says, search the house and the business of my true father. These are the first spoken words of Jesus. His identity has been told by angels, has been acknowledged by an unborn baby, has been alluded to by the temple priest and prophetess, but here and now is finally spoken. He is the Son of the Father whose temple this is. He is the presence of God which will fill the whole world.