

That Gospel we have just heard is an episode from the life of Jesus which is not generally taken to be a part of the Christmas story. Jesus is about twelve years old. The manger and the 'No Vacancies' sign are a distant memory, the angels and the shepherds are long gone whence they came. In fact the story shows no recollection of Jesus once being heralded as 'Saviour, Christ the Lord', and certainly not 'Son of the Most High'.

This little narrative appears to be a strange intrusion, an odd appendage. Luke, an artist with a pen, has composed a carefully balanced story. He begins in the Temple with the aged Zechariah, married to the aged and barren Sarah, offering sacrifice but unable at the end to give the blessing for he is dumbstruck. Luke ends his infancy story in the Temple with another ageing couple: the ancient Anna and the venerable Simeon; and Simeon fills the benediction-lacuna by speaking words of blessing and warning. The infancy story then appears to be over - and then we get this curious add on. Luke, must have a good reason for including this odd little appendage. The reason I would suggest is that Luke was the father of a teenager.

Jesus is a boy of twelve going on twenty who gives his parents grief. Sound familiar? Some of you are or have been the parent of a teenager, you will recognise the scenario. If you are not already the parent of a teenager you might be before long. Some of you are, or have been or will eventually be teenagers. This story is relevant to all.

In those far off days of long ago, the Jewish people did not have a *bar mitzvah* ceremony to mark the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. That was a development in the Middle Ages. Precisely when a boy became a man in first century Palestine was a movable feast. But the change was dramatic. It seems strange to us but in this culture, as in many societies across the Middle East today, men and women lived separate lives, with little contact. Children, boys and girls, lived with the women and were protected, mollycoddled, able to cry and have their tears wiped away for them. Then at a certain point, boys were ejected from the comfy world of aprons and cooking pots into the world of men. A harsh initiation. For in the man's world they had instantly to be able to hold their own in argument and debate, and with physical strength if necessary. Stoicism was the accepted way; tears were for babies not men. From the start the man had to be able to bring honour to themselves and their family and never shame.

At the age of twelve there is ambiguity in Jesus' status. Where does he belong? This confusion is reflected in Jesus being misplaced, lost. Is he a child? Then he belongs with the women and the other children. Is he a man? Then his place is with the menfolk. This then is a story about identity, finding oneself.

This is a problem most teenagers grapple with. Who am I? What are my likes - in music, in dress. Am I a chav? Am I a goth? What do I want to make of my life? How do you decide? Do I care?

Jesus seems to know instinctively who he is and so where he should be. But in typical teenage fashion he doesn't let his parents know. What business it is of theirs?

When they discover that he is not in the caravan, each thinking he is with the other's group, they have to return to Jerusalem. This is every parent's nightmare. Children were all too often lost to illness - there was no medical care and a huge rate of infant mortality, but to lose a child to carelessness...! But returning was not just a matter of a three point turn, or a U-turn at the next roundabout. No one travelled alone in Palestine, then or now. They would have to wait to join a group making the opposite journey. Teenagers don't think about inconvenience caused to others.

The parents return. They search. In the precincts of the Temple the boy-man is found - and wonders what all the fuss is about. There is no remorse expressed. How teenager-like is that? "You are so un-cool! Where did you expect me to be? Am I not my father's son?" If your child went missing wouldn't the first place you look be in dad's place of work as they prepare to take over the running of the family business? Notice how Jesus is described in terms suitable to a prodigy - he is asking the questions and astonishing the learned men with his answers. Clearly no one else gets a word in. Then, in un-typical teenager mode Jesus goes home quietly and he becomes the model youth, increasing in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and men.

And so the point is made: Jesus, even at the age of twelve, is every bit a child, like every other boy on the edge of manhood; **and** he is the son of his Father. A father who is not the husband of Mary, but a Father whose home is the Temple. In other words Jesus is true man and true God. That is what this narrative is about. It is a Christmas story and, in embryo, a Passion story too. It tells us the essence of the Gospel. That's why Luke includes it. Though I still think he might well be speaking from experience - the father of a teenager.