

Christmas 1

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 30 December 2018

Readings: Colossians 3 vv 12-17 and Luke 2 vv 41-end

These days between Christmas and the New Year are wonderful. The first part of December is full of preparations and activity and events when, despite all our best endeavours, Advent is overtaken by Christmas. When the feast of Christmas comes on 25 December, it can easily feel as if Christmas is over. This is, indeed, what the world seems to think, as Christmas decorations are taken down and the shops are displaying Easter eggs and hot cross buns. It could be a very flat time.

But I love these quiet and peaceful days. The telephone doesn't ring as much as usual. The email traffic is quieter and generally less urgent than usual. And, joy of joys, there are no meetings. It is a great joy to relax for a few days and to enjoy the quiet celebration of the wonder of Christmas, that God has entered our world in the form of a tiny baby. His arrival attracts a little attention from the shepherds and, as we will remember next Sunday when we celebrate Epiphany, some wise men from the East. There is the disturbing story of the slaughter of the innocent children at the order of King Herod, frustrated that he has been outwitted by the wise men. But otherwise, the world just trundles on, whilst it waits for the infant Jesus to grow up and begin those few years of teaching, preaching and healing which transform the whole of human history.

Except for one incident. And it's a fascinating glimpse into the life of the Holy Family, at so many different levels.

At one level, it's an entirely ordinary family event. Mary and Joseph make their way to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. We don't know why they didn't observe the Passover at home in Nazareth, but Luke tells us that it was their custom to go to Jerusalem. And so it's not surprising that Jesus accompanies them on this family outing. However, there's a hint that this might have been the first time that Jesus accompanied them. We could infer from the words, 'when he was twelve years old', that accompanying Mary and Joseph to the Passover was a recognition of Jesus' growing maturity.

All proceeds normally and according to plan. Except that Mary and Joseph, for whatever reason, don't check that Jesus is in the party of pilgrims returning to Galilee. They do what people do so often. They made an assumption. And at the end of the day (which seems rather a long time into the journey, but there we are), they realise that Jesus is missing. And they do what any parents would do in these circumstances: they panic.

We find a very realistic and understandable picture of the complexity of family life. All of us, and perhaps especially any of us who is a parent, can recognise and understand Mary's anxiety and anger. We may wonder, as well, whether Mary remembered Simeon's words when Jesus is presented in the Temple, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

But there is a deeper level to this story.

It is very clear that Jesus has a natural authority. Luke suggests that Jesus, although only twelve years old speaks with the teachers in the Temple on equal terms. I wonder

whether some of those who engaged with Jesus on this occasion were those who opposed him later on when his adult ministry had begun.

And Jesus is at home in the Temple. In the years to come, Jesus would have harsh things to say about the way in which the Temple was run. Is it fanciful to think that the anger and disappointment we see years later had its roots in the experience of the twelve year old Jesus? Jesus speaks about 'my Father's house'. Years later, his anger is directed against those who have not upheld the place and significance of the Temple, and who have used it for exploitation of the poor and for purely commercial purposes.

The chronology at this time of the Church's year is a little confusing. In this glimpse into the adolescent Jesus we see the continuation of the relationship with Mary which began in the stable at Bethlehem and, indeed, before that, with Gabriel's greeting and announcement that Mary was to be the mother of God's son. Next Sunday we return to Bethlehem, but with our eyes opened to the wider significance of Jesus beyond his immediate human family as the wise men arrive and speak of Jesus' global significance. And as the weeks of Epiphany unfold, we see how Jesus' ministry was recognised and began to make an impact.

But today, we can stay just for a little longer in the domestic life of the Holy Family, recognising the ups and downs of human life even there, with the encouragement this brings to us as we come to the beginning of a New Year.