

HEARERS OF THE WORD

1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28; Psalm 84 (83); 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24; Luke 2:41-52

Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?

Luke 2:41 Now every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. 43 When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." 49 He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Luke 2:52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Jesus in the Temple is a story unique to Luke's gospel. Luke may well be using a source here (for example, there seems to be no awareness of the virginal conception in the story). Rather than an innocent reminiscence, the story bears the marks of post-Easter composition.

This deceptively simple tale serves several purposes of the evangelist. (i) It reminds us of the Jewishness of Jesus and

his family. (ii) It fulfils one of the conventions of ancient biography: childhood prodigies. (iii) It begins the portrait of Jesus as a prophet and as a reader of Scripture. (iv) It portrays Jesus as a human being, experiencing the ordinary development from childhood onwards. (v) It shows Jesus himself taking "ownership" of all the things said of him thus far in the Infancy Narrative of Luke.

All five elements are significant for Luke. He is very likely writing against what we may call proto-Marcionism, that is the desire to uproot Jesus from his Jewish matrix, and behind that a desire to dismiss Judaism as somehow surpassed and superseded. He may also be countering the beginnings of Apollinarianism, evident in other non-canonical accounts of Jesus' childhood. Typically, these so emphasise the divinity of the child Jesus that he seems hardly human. There is a considerable contrast, for example, with the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (quoted below; you can find it here: www.gnosis.org).

KIND OF WRITING

Typically, biography of the period included these elements: pre-public career of a great person, family background, miraculous conception, omens and other predictions of future greatness, childhood prodigies. These are found in Greek, Roman and Jewish documents of the period: e.g., Cyrus (Herodotus I, 114f.), Alexander the Great (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 5), Moses (Ant. 2.230; Philo, *Life of Moses* 1.21). All these elements are registered in Luke 1-2.

One example may suffice. Josephus, the Jewish priest and historian, untrammelled by false modesty, says of himself:

"When I was a child, about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had of learning; on which

Thought for the day

Today we have a chance to reflect on the *mystery* of our own families! It really is a bit of mystery, how we mostly come out okay from this most intense and formative of experiences. We receive so much that we really want to ponder and to treasure. We can also be burdened by attitudes and traits that we might well wish we were without. Yet, through it all, we are grateful. Family is our "first love" and never really loses its importance for us.

Prayer

Bless all our families. We thank you for the very gift of life itself we have through our parents and for all the other many gifts we receive from our families. We have received so much: help us to continue to give. Help us too to know what to overlook and forget, to pay attention to what can be healed and forgiven, and through it all to continue to love. Amen.

account the high priests and principal men of the city frequently came to me together, to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law."

Josephus, *Life* 9

Two observations may help us grasp more clearly the purpose of the story. Firstly, it does show a concentric pattern as follows:

- A The family goes to Jerusalem (41-42)
- B Jesus remains, unobserved (43)
- C The parents' search (44-46a)
- D *Jesus among the teachers* (46-47)
- C* The parents' reproach (48)
- B* Jesus replies, misunderstood (49-50)
- A* The family returns to Nazareth (51a)

In such a layout, the focus falls on Jesus as source of wisdom, a characterisation which will continue through the Gospel as Jesus interprets the Scriptures on his own authority (Luke 4:1-13; 4:16-21; 7:26-27; 10:25-28; 20:17-18; 20:37-38; 20:41-44; 24:25-27, 32; 24:44-47).

Secondly, the climax in terms of plot

must fall on B*, when Jesus makes his transparently enigmatic response. The complication in v. 43 leads to this climax in the form of dialogue and thus the emphasis really falls on the *future career* of the child prodigy.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD. (Exodus 23:14–17)

Cf. also Deuteronomy 16:1–8, 16–17 and Luke 22:7–13.

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the LORD and with the people. (1Samuel 2:26)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

ST PAUL

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4–7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 41 The scene is set with characters, time and place. As often in the introduction, we are told *what they usually did*. This tells us that they are an obser-

vant, pious family.

Verse 42 In Israelite tradition, one passed from childhood to adulthood at the age of thirteen (teenagers had not yet been invented). Accordingly, Jesus is still a child. The association with *Bar Mitzvah* is erroneous. The “as usual” is a hint of things to come: Jesus is shown regularly praying and going to the synagogue “as was his custom.”

Verse 43 The details arouses our interest: how did this happen, when will the parents notice, what will they do? Above all, what will be the outcome?

Verse 44 A reaction which adds suspense by slowing down the telling.

Verse 45 The suspense is sustained. In this Gospel, Jerusalem functions at the *location* of salvation. Towards the end of the Gospel, there will be another return to Jerusalem: That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem. (Luke 24:33)

Verse 46 In popular stories, the number three is important but here it must have a resonance for the reader familiar with the Jesus story.

Verse 47 Cf. the reaction of one expert in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*:

Now when Zacchaeus the teacher heard such and so many allegories of the first letter spoken by the young child, he was perplexed at his answer and his instruction being so great, and said to them that were there: Woe is me, wretch that I am, I am confounded: I have brought shame to myself by drawing to me this young child. Take him away, therefore I beseech thee, my brother Joseph: I cannot endure the severity of his look, I cannot once make clear my (or his) word. This young child is not earthly born: this is one that can tame even fire: be like this is one begotten before the making of the world. ... I have deceived myself, thrice wretched man that I am: I strove to get me a disciple and I am found to have a master.

Verse 48 This is the emotional climax of the story. To express the anxiety of the parents, the narrative at last breaks into dialogue.

Verse 49 There are two possible translations here, because the Greek does not contain the word “house.” Instead, it runs literally, *I must be “in the things” of my father*. So we can translate by Temple, my father’s house, although the usage is unusual. It may also be rendered “my father’s business” as in the Douai-Rheims translation (also KJV and JB).

The “must” is part of the “divine imperative” found elsewhere in the narrative: 4:43; 9:22; 11:42; 17:25; 22:37.

Verse 51 A double conclusion, showing Jesus to be fully human and taking up once more the pondering of Mary.

Verse 52 An inclusion: *The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.* (Luke 2:40). Cf. *The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.* (Luke 1:80)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Luke’s skill as a storyteller comes through in the details of the story in a way that many people can identify with: the loss of a child, the frantic search, the seemingly offhand speech of the teenager. Let the drama of the story speak to you. Where do you find good news in it?

2. In Luke’s Gospel this story serves to give a glimpse of the future greatness of Jesus, the teacher of his people. Sometimes we can look back over our own life, or the lives of others, and with hindsight can see in childhood or teenage years a glimpse of gifts and talents that were later to blossom. Where have you seen this?

3. “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business?” This seemingly insensitive reply by Jesus to Mary serves to highlight that in his life the mission given him by God would take precedence over family ties, painful though this would be. Perhaps you have known situations in your own life, or in the life of another, where there was pain for family members as you followed your own destiny? Where in the midst of the pain was the good news?

PRAYER

As your sons and daughters, O loving God, we come before you in thanksgiving, called and united by your eternal Word.

Teach us to ponder the mystery of Nazareth, that we may always find in you the source of our strength and the unity of our families.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

When God is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see God as he is

1 John 3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 *And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

1 John 3:23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading helpfully shifts the focus of the feast to the family of *the faith*. The author wants to remind us deeply and richly of our being children of God. He knows well that this “being born again” is mysterious in the present not to speak of into the future.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The content is appropriate at any time in Christian reflection. Perhaps, however, it was even more appropriate to those who first read the Fourth Gospel, which had, it would seem, been both understood and misunderstood.

We know already from that Gospel that some kind of break has taken place, precisely over the identity of Jesus: *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.* (John 6:60, 66)

KIND OF WRITING

The whole document more of a sermon than a letter and perhaps a hybrid category—epistolary sermon—does it justice. To deepen his teaching, the author relies upon a circular, repetitive style, wherein the same material is revisited in another light.

1:1-4 Introduction
1:5-2:17 Exhortation
2:28-27 Affirmations
2:28-3:24 Exhortation

4:1-6 Affirmations
4:7-5:5 Exhortation
5:6-12 Affirmations
5:13-21 Conclusion

Accordingly, our reading should be read in light of the whole section 2:28-3:24.

RELATED PASSAGES

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1John 4:7-12)

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1John 4:16)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. (1John 5:1)

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 A new exhortation starts with the imperative “See.” This writer reserves the expression “son of God” (*huios tou theou*) for Jesus and uses instead “children of God” (*tekna theou*) for believers. This gift is a measure of God's love, a love directed to the future. The community may feel not recognised, but the writer explains why. Its nothing to do with them (or us): the “world” does not know God *and therefore* does not know those who believe in God.

Verse 2 The favourite address “beloved” underscores the love of God from the previous verse. Our whole goal is to be “like” God—a breath-taking goal. It does mean that our present reali-

ty, however rich and deep, does not exhaust what God has in store. This is a rare eschatological view in the Johannine texts. Something beyond what we could know or even imagine is offered. Cf. Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (John 3:3) (1Jn 3:3, essential from the writer's viewpoint, is omitted in the lectionary.)

Verse 23 This section is coming to a close and a concluding summary is being offered. *We* tend to summarise the Gospel with love of God and neighbour (not inaccurately and indeed on the basis of Jesus' teaching). However, our author has another perspective: first Christ and then the practice of love. *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* (John 17:3) *But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:31) It parallels his teaching on the love of God: God loved us first. Our faith and our love are not without doctrinal content. At the same time, the vertical is matched by the earnest horizontal of practical love and service. For all the talk of love, commandments are huge in 1-3 John: 1 John 2:3-4, 7-8; 3:22-24; 4:21; 5:2-3; 2 John 1:5-6 (cf. in the Gospel: John 12:49-50; 13:34; 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12).

Verse 24 Our “being in God” is finally looked at from two perspectives, both familiar from the Fourth Gospel. *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* (John 15:10) *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* (John 3:6) *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* (John 20:22)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Christmas is *our* birth as well: let us celebrate and rejoice and give thanks.
2. Eternal life is surely abstract but believing in Christ is not an loving our neighbour are not: on the contrary!

PRAYER

Father, let your love penetrate our hearts; help us, your children, to live the love we have received in Jesus. Amen.

I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord

1 Sam 1:20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked (š^oiltīw) him of the LORD.”

1 Sam 1:21 The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.” 23 *Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the LORD establish his word.” So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him.* 24 When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. 26 And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. 27 For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made (š^oēlāti) to him. 28 Therefore I have lent (hiš^oiltīhū) him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given (šā^oūl) to the LORD.” She left him there for the Lord.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is the suggested reading for Year C. Nevertheless, it is a little unusual, given that it tells the story of a mother who, having given birth to the longed-for child, now hands him over to service in the Temple at the very young age of about three years. Essential and very touching background reading is given under Old Testament background.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

1 Samuel begins with an account of the birth of the prophet. The story illustrates the motif of the “barren matriarch” who child will somehow be significant in the story of salvation. For example, Sarah, Rachel, the wife of Minoah and mother of Samson. Frequently, this is interlaced with domestic friction with another wife/sister who is fertile. Analysis of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings is complex. It may be sufficient to note that 1 Samuel starts with the Song of Hannah

(1Sam 2) and closes with the Song of David (1 Sam 23). This *literary* frame serves also as a *theological* frame. Contrary to first impressions, the history of Israel is not all war and blood but actually the story of YHWH’s salvation.

KIND OF WRITING

The preceding story of promise resembles other annunciation stories and Hannah’s prayer is very like the individual psalms of distress. As we take up the story, YHWH has “remembered” Hannah and she gives birth to a son. The purpose of this intricate story of conception and birth is to underline the divine intervention in the birth of Samuel and the family context of both disdain (from the other wife) and devotion (from her husband).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.

So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1Samuel 1:1–8; see also vv. 9–19)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 20 The conception and birth are speedily dispatched. The choice of name is explained etymologically. The name may mean God (*el*) has heard (*shama*).

Verses 21 A whole year has passed and it is time for Elkanah to officiate again at Shiloh.

Verse 22 Hannah decides not to go up until the child is robust enough to be left there. “Nazirites” occurs more frequently than one might imagine: Num 6:2, 4–5, 8, 12–13, 18–21; Judg 13:5, 7; 16:17; 1 Sam 1:11, 22; Amos 2:11–12; 1 Macc 3:49. These were men and women, consecrated to God for a specific period. See Num 6:1–21. Matthew hints at this in his combined (and non-existent) citation *There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”* (Matthew 2:23)

Verse 23 The father agrees, adding a prayer for the future of Samuel. Weaning could take up to three years (cf. 2 Macc 7:27).

Verse 24 The gifts are substantial and notably valuable. Shiloh was the chief northern shrine through much of the pre-monarchic period.

Verse 25 To understand the role of Eli, read 1 Sam 1:9–18. Eli is no great “discerner” as we see shortly in 1 Samuel 3.

Verses 26–27 Eli had mediated the blessing and now he receives the fruit of God’s intervention.

Verse 28 Word play is meant to be instructive here (see the insertions in the text): to ask, to loan and to give all play on the consonants of *sha’al*, to ask. The child will be a “Saul” to God. The great Song of Hannah follows.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This is a story of God’s grace to Hannah, a story of new life from barrenness. It can be our story too.

2. This is also a story of need, trust and petition and we may add stubbornness. Persistence in prayer means not so much time as coming from deep within.

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to be patient and persistent in prayer. Even before we speak, you know already what we need. We trust in the gifts you want to give us, if only we had hearts and lives to receive them. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28; Psalm 84 (83); 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24; Luke 2:41-52

READINGS 1 AND 3

In both readings, we see portrayed couples full of devotion, tenderness and faith. God did indeed establish the word of Samuel and in Jesus established his word made flesh. The centre of action in both stories is a temple, the earlier one at Shiloh and the later one in Jerusalem.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 84 (83) takes up the theme of longing for the Temple, so present in both the first reading and in the Gospel. The third strophe suits Hannah especially: *O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer, give ear, O God of Jacob.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28

The birth of Samuel was special. His parents, Hannah and her husband pray for a child and their prayer is heard. They come back to the Temple to dedicate their son to God — he will become the great seer and prophet Samuel.

Second reading

1 John 3:1-2

Our short reading uses family language—we are God’s children—this is what we are now and what we will be in the wonderful, unknown future which God has in store for those who love him.

Gospel

Luke 2:41-52

This moving story will touch the hearts of parents today and perhaps surprise them. Its real purpose is to foreshadow, to portray in miniature, what the Christ child will become: God’s prophet, who will bear the word of God to us.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 30 December

1 John 2:12-17

The write addresses different “constituencies” in the community, children, the young and parents. A little care is needed in understanding: the “world” is

not creation as such but evil forces which take us away from God.

Luke 2:36-40

This story continues yesterday, balancing the genders. Calling Anna a “prophetess” can surprise, but there were indeed women prophets in ancient Israel: Miriam, Deborah, the wife of Isaiah, Huldah and Noadiah. In very old age, the Anna is full of expectation and discernment.

Tuesday 31 December

St Sylvester 1, bishop of Rome

1 John 2:18-21

There is an edgy moment in this reading. Clearly some members have defected (and are dismissed), but the final tone is affirmative: It is not because you do not know the truth that I am writing to you but rather because you know it already.

John 1:1-18

This great reading was already proclaimed on Christmas Day. We are invited to listen again, with “the ears of the heart” as St Augustine puts it. As you listen, notice that we too are part of the proclamation, part of the Good News.

Wednesday 1 January 2025

Mary, mother of God

Numbers 6:22-27

As a new year opens, we glance back over the previous year, looking not only to the outward events, but also to the inward journey. Have I grown in faith? What nourished me this year?

Galatians 4:4-7

All of us know from within that we are children of God and, in the Spirit, we can call out Abba, Father!

Luke 2:16-21

The portrait of Mary in Luke 1-2 is meant to illustrate discipleship and to inspire disciples. Clearly a woman of faith, she appropriates all that happens by treasuring and pondering. Cf. Luke 2:51.

Wednesday 2 January

Sts Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, bishops and doctors

1 John 2:22-28

The reading reflects profound conflict in the community of the Fourth Gospel over Jesus’ identity. It would seem that at least some did not accept the deep teaching about Jesus as the word made flesh.

John 1:19-28

All the Gospels are anxious about the identity of John the Baptist and are keen to relativise his significance. In this late Gospel, John the Baptist sharply denies the various categories used. For this Gospel, he is the *voice in the desert* where as Jesus is the *Word made flesh*.

Friday 3 January

*The Most Holy Name of Jesus
St Munchin, bishop*

1 John 2:29-3:6

Today we hear a justly famous passage, which goes simply and directly to the heart of the matter. The proclamation of the love of God is completed by presenting the consequences for us as believers.

John 1:29-34

What John says of Jesus reflects the understanding of the Fourth Gospel, an understanding which is deep and challenging. Most likely, we are not really hearing the opinion of the historical John the Baptist but the theology of the evangelist.

Saturday 4 January

1 John 3:7-10

The test of good living is not introspection but inspection of how we actually live and what choices we make. As Archbishop Temple put it long ago: it is not the action matters and prayer helps but that prayer matters and action is its test.

John 1:35-42

The question at the centre of this Gospel is the key question for life as such. A slightly more accurate translation could be: what do you desire? The question comes up again in John 20 with a highly significant adjustment: whom are you looking for?