

“Who’s Your Daddy?” – Luke 2:41-52

I don’t know how you react, but when I read this episode from Luke’s gospel about Jesus and his parents in the Temple when he was twelve years old I kinda want to cringe. Now I know we live in the golden post-Dr.-Spock era in which children are never, never – like in the land where the buffalo roam – to hear a discouraging word, but this story reminds me of the time when I was 12 and, as they used to describe young men at that age, my “brain was not fully-grown yet!” As a result, my mouth would often say things that if my brain had been fully developed or at least in gear would never have allowed me to utter. Flagrant indiscretions such as asking my distraught parents when they finally found me, “where did you think I would be?” would at the very least earn a long lecture on my role and position in society – particularly vis-à-vis parents – and certainly a whole pile of “doghouse” points! That kind of sass and lip, sadly all-too-common today, was unheard of when I was 12, and the fact that at that age I was at least 5cm taller than my father was no passport to offering such sarcastic and smart-ass replies.

So when I read this account in Luke’s gospel I cringe a bit, and always stop to ponder the effect on Jesus’ parents, and about the circumstances. And when I do ponder, I realize that his response was not nearly the sass that it seems to be on first reading. Even today in a Jewish context a young man being precocious is often seen as an asset and even an indication of extra intelligence and character rather than a problem. Recall also that Jesus is specifically identified as being twelve, an age that seems rather young to us, but Luke’s signal is that Jesus had reached the age of adolescence, a significant stepping-stone on the way to manhood. That accomplishment was further underscored by the serious attention that was paid by people in the Temple to his questions and his answers. In his cultural context the next and final step into respectable adulthood would occur at age thirty ... the assumed age of Jesus when he began his ministry.

Apart from the issue of Jesus’ response there are other interesting questions raised in this text as well. For example, the claim that his parents had gone up to the festival every year. While there was a legal requirement for males to attend at least three festivals a year, practicalities such as the cost and time of travel were challenges. That Jesus’ mother also went was not particularly unusual, but it does signal that his parents – and thus his early life – were most likely fairly well off. After all, the journey was at least several days (at a very minimum two, since they discovered he was not in the caravan after the first day’s travel) ... a major trip, and thus an expensive adventure on a yearly basis.

But perhaps the most difficult question is how Jesus’ parents responded to the content of his reply? “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know that I could only have been in my Father’s house?” Here is the first – given the confusion of Mary and Joseph – indication from Jesus of his sense of divinity or at least direct connection with God. One could pose the question about whether the parents had already forgotten all that surrounded the unusual conception and birth of this child, but there are no ready answers to that in scripture. There is one hint that Mary was aware, and an even stronger hint that Luke might have had the chance to speak with her, a hint given in the poignant statement that “his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” And in the end, like a good Jewish boy, Jesus returned with the family and all was well back in Nazareth.

We can hardly blame Joseph and Mary if they had already after twelve years forgotten some of the details around Jesus’ birth ... in our contemporary society that

takes most people less than twenty-four hours. By the time the stores open for Door-Crasher Specials on Boxing Day most people have put the angels, the magi, the stable, and especially the Baby aside for another year. No more Christmas carols pronouncing his birth, because we've been saturated for a month or more already. The Little Drummer Boy has been mercifully silenced, and the silence and calm of the Holy Night has succumbed to "Attention Shoppers! A new shipment of doodads has just arrived on a pallet in aisle twenty-seven ... medics are standing by!" The transition from Christmas reindeer to Easter bunnies is well under way.

I shouldn't be too harsh, I suppose, for that same transition happens almost as quickly in Luke's gospel, and this incident is the final in that brief description of the child between birth and ministry. All the incidents in that transition have a similar theme, namely that Jesus is clearly connected with God right from the beginning, affirmed by those who have dedicated their lives to God or who are active worshippers. The difference in Luke's gospel however is that the transition is filled with reverence and awe for God and for the grace of God in Christ, and as we continue on through Luke's account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we hear that theme proclaimed and praised over and over.

Today we are also in a rapid transition, for we are in that "in-between time" just days after Christmas and a few days before the New Year. And because of the vagaries between a solar and a lunar calendar this year Lent and Easter come very early, and so we will also be rushed from Christmas to Easter. But let's try not to rush that too quickly. Hopefully even as we anticipate celebrating the start of what could be a very challenging year we should let the sounds and the smells of Christmas linger as long as possible. Savour the transition of the Babe in the manger into adulthood, even with the attendant challenging theological questions, and perhaps just take it on faith that in ways we may not ever totally understand Jesus was fully human and fully divine at the same time.

That was ultimately the whole point of Luke including this episode as one of the very few ascriptions we have of Jesus as a child. It was not to flesh out all of those years with fanciful accounts of Jesus as some kind of weird kid doing magical tricks as did later writers, for example in what is known as the Gospel of Thomas. The intent here was to show Jesus as a very responsible young man, responsible both to his earthly parents and to his heavenly Father. For Jesus, the question "who's your daddy?" seems to have been answered with "both" reflecting his duality of being fully human to identify with us and fully divine, one with God.

Give thanks and rejoice for Jesus' parents, Mary the mother and Joseph the father, who tended the child and raised him well. That could not have been an easy task in many ways. Give thanks to God, the divine father of Jesus, who in this child dwelt among us full of grace and truth, establishing a new covenant of accessibility to him through faith in Christ. Give thanks and rejoice for the gift of Jesus, Babe in a manger, child in the temple, adult on the cross, and resurrected Saviour, a gift from his Father and our Father.