

Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

Just imagine their worry, their stress, their anxiety, their fear. Just imagine how they must be feeling, suddenly finding themselves alone, bereft, completely unprepared for life without their loved one.

I'm not talking about Jesus' parents in today's Gospel when he decided, seemingly in an early fit of adolescent pique, to go off on his own in Jerusalem.

No, I'm talking about all those parents and guardians who dropped off their young ones at halls of residence in London ten days ago and have hardly heard from them since.

It's known as ENS, apparently: not the Episcopal News Service, which is how our Anglican sisters and brothers in the USA find out about Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's latest sermons; no, ENS stands for Empty Nest Syndrome: that feeling of loneliness that parents may experience when their children leave home for the first time, such as when they go away to university.

So if you take only one thing away from this sermon today, let it be this: while you're here at King's, please keep in touch with those who love you, be it parents, guardians, friends or partners. Just imagine their worry, their anxiety when they don't hear from you; and just remember how much they love you – even when they don't hear from you.

Of course, I was too quick to put today's Gospel reading to one side a moment ago, because it too is about anxious parents. In fact, read through the experience of Jesus' parents, particularly Mary, this is a deeply troubling episode. Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem – having done the right thing as observant Jews and celebrated the festival of the Passover – and start their journey home to Nazareth; on the way they realise that their child is missing and begin a frantic search to find him; they eventually find him in the temple, alive and well – after three days, notice – and Mary asks Jesus angrily but quite understandably: “Child, why have you treated us like this?” And Jesus' seemingly nonchalant reaction leaves them completely baffled: “They did not understand what he said to them.” And more than that, echoing her response twelve years earlier, when the angel Gabriel told her that her son is the Messiah (Luke 2:19), we're told that “Mary treasured all these things in her heart”, that is, she held on to all the things that had been said, she kept thinking about them, she kept turning them over and over. So here she is once again, as she was just after giving birth, troubled, certainly, but at the same time deeply attentive to what God is revealing, and trying hard, trying desperately hard – and from the very centre of her being – to understand what is going on, to understand the mystery of the Gospel.

And if Mary remembered the angel Gabriel's words, perhaps she also remembered old Simeon's prophecy shortly afterwards that her son was destined for “the falling and the rising of many in Israel” and that a sword would pierce her own soul too (Luke 2:34-35). Indeed, I wonder if Mary and Joseph were simply struggling to let Jesus grow up. A child's growing

up necessarily changes the parents' lives: my children are doing that to me now; I know I did it to my parents; you probably did it to yours. And in today's gospel Jesus is doing just that to Mary and Joseph.

For Jesus is growing up in today's Gospel; Mary isn't the only one here trying to understand what's going on. She and Joseph find Jesus "in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions". Importantly for us in our context, Jesus is portrayed in this account as an active learner in the academic sense, asking questions of those who teach him. (Yes, your tutors at King's will like it if you ask questions.) And notice that, while he does engage deeply with the sacred texts of Judaism, his isn't just bookish learning; his understanding also comes from a lived relationship with those around him, with his teachers, with his parents – and with the God whom he calls Father.

So this episode isn't about Jesus running off in a fit of adolescent pique after all; instead, he's not lost at all, but he's right where he needs to be and doing exactly what he needs to be doing, starting to live into his vocation as the Son of God, claiming his new identity by asking questions of the scholars in the temple – the first of the hundreds of questions that Jesus will ask in the course of his earthly life, modelling for us the wondering, the doubting, the thinking-it-through that helps us draw closer to God and better understand ourselves.

So Jesus' question to his parents – and these are the first words we hear Jesus speak in the Gospel according to St Luke – "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?", isn't a nonchalant reaction after all. In fact, it's a heavily loaded question that suggests that Jesus is already starting to discern God's purpose in a perplexing world, already starting to understand himself as the Son of God, rather than merely the son of Mary and Joseph, already starting to realise that he must be about his Father's business, doing the will of God, doing the work of God, being the one through whom God will open wide his arms – even on the cross – and embrace the world. Did you not know, we can hear him asking Mary and us, that if you want to find me, then you must look in the places where my Father's will is being done? Did you not know that if you want to be with me, then you must participate in what I am about – feeding the hungry, loving the unlovable, welcoming the unwanted?

This is the only story told about the youth of Jesus in the gospels – and it's a story about growing wisdom, growing insight, growing self-awareness: Jesus returned to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, the Gospel tells us, and "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour". This is a story about reaching for knowledge, about a journey to self-understanding, about the pursuit of wisdom and the process of discerning God's purpose. Holiness and wisdom, you might say: *sancte et sapienter*, in the words of the College's motto.

So, if you take another thing away from this sermon today, let it be this: with Jesus' example before you, see your time at King's as an opportunity to reach for better understanding, to question what you know, to become who you are, to discover slowly and patiently how God means you to grow into what you are made to be, to discern God's call for you as one of God's beloved children – a call to find your truest self and to live life in all its abundance, moving into deeper and more authentic relationships with God and with those around you. And remember that you're not alone in that search for better understanding, precisely because those around you are engaged in that very same search, precisely because you're part of a community here.

Today's reading from the letter to the Colossians is helpful when it comes to questions of community. Of course, with the newly refurbished organ, we can now join together and, as the letter puts it, "with gratitude in [our] hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God". Alleluia! The letter also maintains that true community is achieved through mutual edification: "Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom." This isn't about the simple transfer of knowledge; rather, as Jesus demonstrated in the temple and throughout his ministry, it's about cultivating a level of understanding that benefits not only ourselves but also others: remember that in the College Prayer, said during Morning Prayer each weekday in this Chapel, we pray that what we do here at King's "may bring forth fruit abundantly to [God's] glory and the benefit of our fellow creatures".

So let's thank God today, at the start of this new academic year, that King's is a community in which intellectual inquiry can be pursued in the context of spirituality. And let's commit ourselves to ensuring, by our words and our actions, that King's is a community in which we live responsibly before one another and are genuinely sensitive to one another's needs – a community characterised, as the letter to the Colossians suggests, by compassion, kindness and thankfulness.

And if there's one last thing that you take away from this sermon today, let it be this: that King's is a place where thinking about what we learn goes hand in hand with thinking about how we live and about how we become fully who we are meant to be in Jesus Christ, human beings, each of us in our unique distinctiveness, gloriously made in the image of God.

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