

Mothering Sunday 2021 Luke 2:41-52

Any parents watching this will know the experience – or at least the fear of it. In pre-pandemic days you are in a crowded place like a supermarket or a shopping centre with a small child. They insist on walking, not riding in the pushchair. Just for a second you loosened your grip on them to get something out of your pocket or a bag that they need and they're gone. Out of sight. The panic, horror, dread of something terrible happening briefly grips you, until you see them a few metres away at the toys or maybe a sweet counter. I have certainly been there, and I am sure many of you have too.

Today on Mothering Sunday we hear of such an experience happening to Mary the mother of Jesus, along with Joseph with their 12-year-old son. It is the only story we have in the Bible about Jesus between him being an infant and starting his ministry aged around 30, and it places him just before he would be regarded as of age in Jewish culture. I have often wondered why we have so little about most of his earthly life, and for me that makes this story stand out.

There are aspects of this incident that anyone who has been to a large event or festival as part of a group will recognise. You are travelling along, or perhaps queuing to go in somewhere; your child has been with friends or relatives, so you assume he's with them, and they assume he's with you. A bit of time, and only after a while do you check and realise he isn't with either group. Luke reports Mary and Joseph doing just that. Then in a world with no mobile phones (or any fast communications) the only option is to retrace their steps.

How much that must have scared them. This special baby, heralded by visions and angels, given a significant name, and acknowledged as a light for the world in the Temple, now lost because of a careless oversight. He isn't a baby any more, but at 12 he's still vulnerable, and there are some dangerous people around... They would have all the normal fear and anxiety of parents in that situation, plus a feeling that in some way they have let God down too.

Luke records that they find him after 3 days. We need to remember that is counting days inclusively, so they lose him one day, travel back to the city on the second and find him on the third. Even so, can you imagine it, running up and down the crowded street of Jerusalem trying to ascertain his whereabouts. Then they find him in the Temple Courts, quizzing the teachers and marking himself out as a remarkable kid.

The tone of Mary's voice must have been sharper than we usually read it. They must have been relieved, yet also quite angry: "Why have you treated us like this?"

So I want to focus on the answer that the 12-year-old Jesus gives. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

A number of things strike me about his response:

1. Taken at face value, the passage suggests that Mary and Joseph end up at the Temple; they don't start there. Perhaps there is a suggestion here from Jesus that they ought to have known where to begin their search.
2. Even if they didn't get that point, he seems to be reminding them that God is his Father. It's quite hard to get your head round what it means for the Son of God to be a child, but here he is on the brink of becoming 13 – 'of age' in his culture and he clearly understands who his true Father is.

Following on from that, I think there is a deeper point in this story, which relates more closely to our Mothering Sunday theme today. Mothering – indeed all parenting – involves change. Sooner or later every parent is faced with letting their children go – and some cope with it better than others.

Mary and Joseph were no different. Jesus will continue to live at home and co-operate with them for 18 years or so, but the process of letting go has begun here. He is starting to refer more to God as his father, which must have been a challenge for Joseph, even though he knew it was true. Mary and Joseph will have to let Jesus go for him to fulfil his purpose - they cannot keep him at home to take on the carpentry business. Joseph doesn't seem to be around by the time Jesus starts his ministry, so Mary has to deal with another letting go – from him being simple part of her family with his brothers, to him regarding all of his followers as his family (Mark 3:34-35). Her love for her son not only involved joy; it also meant pain and cost – as all authentic love does.

Looking at it that way round, we can all see how the love of a parent always involves an element of sacrifice, letting go and setting free – it is seen in Jesus earthly family, and also seen in the way God himself releases his Son into the world in vulnerability and humility in order to fulfil his purpose.

Secondly, I think it speaks to us about our relationship with God. Jesus' words make it clear that he thought his Heavenly Father had first call on him, but that wasn't a call that excluded other people. On the contrary, as he grew, he gave himself more and more to other people; he didn't shut himself away, and affirmed that his followers were like brother, sister or mother.

One of the big challenges of this last year has been the lack of contact we have had with one another – in families, in communities, in churches and in society. In-person contact has been illegal other than in very limited ways. Technology has helped, but you can't hug over Zoom (or even shake hands). And the practise of our faith – even for ministers – has become a private one. Here I am in my study on my own. But that isn't and shouldn't be the norm. We all need time on our own, but to grow in our relationship with God and our appreciation of his love, there is a very important social dimension to it. To experience fully God as parent, we need to have that experience in fellowship with other family members.

Mothering Sunday for the Church isn't just – or even primarily – a celebration of human motherhood, although much commercial marketing is pitched that way this weekend. It is a recognition that we are all secure as children of God, loved and freed, and that we share in a unique and inclusive family – God's people the Church. Our experience of human mothers, mothering or being mothered may or may not be good, but just as Jesus knew he was in his Father's house, we can know that we are in God's family.

God of love, passionate and strong,

tender and careful;

watch over us and hold us

all the days of our life;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.