

Sunday 27th Sermon

It is barely possible to communicate to people who do not have children the sheer gut-jellying sense of doom that can attach to the words “We thought they were with you.”

It might be in a playground, among the aisles of a supermarket or on a busy street – small children can go innocently wandering off, vanishing from one place and reappearing in another like sub-atomic particles. Every time it happens it’s a heart-stopper. And that’s before they start hiding for fun. The fear never leaves you.

So in this story from Luke’s Gospel, clearly constructed to echo the account of Samuel’s childhood at Shiloh we heard earlier, any parent’s sympathies are inclined toward Mary and Joseph, the ordinary, anxious and bewildered parents of a most extraordinary boy. But we need to examine it a little more closely, and be careful how we read it. Because here Jesus is not a small child. He is twelve years old, and knows better, and we could get the impression that he deliberately ducks out of the homeward-bound caravan from the Passover festival in order to buy himself some extra time in the Temple. Possibly that’s what Luke wants us to think, keen as he is to impress upon us the revelatory significance of Christ’s every word and deed, even in childhood, and long before his baptism and the formal start of his ministry. And yet if we take that reading, the boy Jesus is guilty of a selfish and heartless act that causes his parents needless distress, and his reply to his mother when she rebukes him is callous and insolent.

Much more likely, surely, is that Jesus, having been afforded a degree of licence appropriate to a boy on the verge of manhood, to go and explore on his own as long as he's back in time for departure, cuts it too fine, misses his party in the crowds, and finds himself left behind – and the wording of the original text does not necessarily imply that he did it on purpose. He's still going to be in trouble, but at least he knows what to do. He goes to the Temple, where, presumably, kind strangers put him up and feed him for three days – though Luke gives them no credit – and amazes everyone with his wisdom. Still, after her initial relief, Mary is understandably cross when she finds him, but now his reply to her, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?”, is not cheeky defiance, but innocent puzzlement. His parents don't seem to get it, and he has hurt them inadvertently – which is probably why, as Luke tells us, he is so obedient to them when he gets home.

Now, to get technical for a moment, the significant phrase in that reply, the Greek “en tois tou patros mou”, literally “in the midst of my Father's things, or stuff” is normally translated “in my Father's house”, because it certainly refers to the Temple and the teaching and learning that are conducted in and around it, and so carries the sense of “in my Father's establishment”, though it is sometimes rendered as “about my Father's business” or “interests”. But one word about whose translation there is no debate is “patros”, from “pater”, “Father”.

In the most recent 50 of the last three or four thousand years within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the idea of God the Father has become an issue, especially for

feminist Christians, because it has been seen as not just the product of a patriarchal society whose assumptions are now challenged, but also as a means of reinforcing it, and even as a theological justification for the continued subjugation of women. But there are many passages in the New Testament that challenge that thesis, and, as it happens, this is one of them. For here it is Mary, not Joseph, who is the authority figure, it is Mary who rebukes the erring child, and Mary who stores away in her heart the revelatory significance that Luke is hammering home, of what a splash this prodigy has made in the Temple, and the purity of heart that leads him to assume *that* is the first place his parents will look for him.

But in any case, the concept of God the Father is not just a harmless product of historical and linguistic convention that we need only leave well alone, because it clearly does not exalt men over women, or let men who disgrace the name of fatherhood off the hook, and was never any kind of argument against women's ordination. God is not male or female. God is not constrained within a sexual identity, and to attempt a striking of balance by referring occasionally to God the Mother is just one of the many ways in which we can miss the point. For ascribing the female gender to God is not "just as bad" as the alternative, it makes the alternative just as bad as itself, by reinforcing the notion that ascribing human gender to the Almighty was what we were doing in the first place.

As our minister, Lance, pointed out from this pulpit on Christmas Day – and what a long time ago that seems – we can know of God only what He reveals to us; which, for me, and I'm not putting words in his mouth here, because

I accept that my theological training was different from his, means that we must frame all our understanding of God in metaphors that are within our understanding.

So to speak of God as “She” doesn’t just miss the point. It leads us away from the symbolism of the Word as the spoken thought of God, from Creation through Inspiration, from a willed act of Creation as the original, the ultimate act of love that is so essential to our theology and faith, and leads us instead toward a creation itself divine, a parthenogenic, self-consistent fertility, and a pagan, animist cosmos that is exclusive of divinely inspired, human love.

And we can say that our earthly state of male and female, with the life that arises from it, is the divine metaphor through which we grasp the mystery of Creation.

Yes, when we speak of Him, and of God the Father, we must remember that we are employing a metaphor. But we must also remember that it’s the right one.

So, that’s that.

Well, it isn’t, of course. But it’s one way of looking at the subject, and something to think about.

Now in this Church of Scotland haven of Christian worship in Amsterdam we enjoy a variety of preaching styles, from our own pastor, from visiting ministers, and from occasional lay preachers like me. When I preach here, I don’t usually get controversial, and my sermons tend to be more fire-side chat than fire and brimstone. Anyone who has heard our dear friend, Rev John Bell when he’s going good will know what I mean. “I’m talking about you!” I don’t usually do that. But this morning, I have perhaps

been a little controversial, and now, in my understated English way, I am going to get a bit fire-and-brimstone on you.

Because I wonder, as we sit here, two days after Christmas, in our Father's house, whether what we are doing is also susceptible to alternative translation. Are we about His business or His interests? I have no doubt, that if one of these children somehow got left behind today, there would be no shortage of people in these pews, willing to provide food and shelter and comfort until the parents could be found. Thanks to social media this probably wouldn't take anything like three days, although the mother's reaction once the reunion was effected would still likely be much the same as Mary's.

That's one thing. But we know that God's business, God's interests, are not just something that happen here, or within the community of this congregation. This is something we should all be about, all the time, insofar as we are able. It is given to very few of us, and certainly not to me, to have the strength and competence to be a minister, to still fewer to have the courage, and depth of love, to face hatred and violence in the pursuit of our Christian mission. But that doesn't mean there's nothing the rest of us have to offer, and simply doing our best to lead good lives in our own little worlds isn't quite enough. We must remember that we are commanded to love our neighbour, and take a good hard look at exactly how we can obey that command, how the willingness we would feel to help a lost child can be extended to the people who live around and among us. And yes, I am talking about you.

Now one of *my* neighbours, in the more literal sense of living two doors away, is a firmly convinced atheist, and when he's had a couple of glasses of my wine he has a go at me for being a seemingly intelligent and rational man who buys into a system of superstition based on the unknowable, and who even gives some of his time to perpetuating it. It's all very friendly, and I'm not incurring any personal risk by arguing with him. But the thing that amuses me is that this guy is a professional classical violinist. His whole life and being are devoted to a process of spiritual communication that everyone understands and nobody can explain, and yet he has the nerve to jeer at my faith in the love of God. When I talk to him the word "denial" is always at the front of my mind. He's a tough nut to crack, but nuts do have a hard shell and a soft centre, and I hope and pray that I, or someone, is there to catch him when the shell finally shatters.

In my experience of Amsterdam, though, people like this are very rare. In this city that so prides itself on a secular ethic of liberal tolerance, most of the people I know, apart from the friends I first met here, are mildly interested that I come to church every Sunday, but only as though I were into crystals, or cross-country skiing. "Whatever works for you" about sums it up, and that genial indifference to faith can be harder to cope with than outright hostility, because you really don't know where to start. But dig a little deeper, and you find that most of these people went to church when they were younger, but fell out of the habit. Some of them lost it when they moved to Amsterdam, and found that none of their new friends was at all religious. Others, sadly, were put off in adolescence by dour pastors who seemed to have no message of hope

and joy. Others married outside their denominations, or even outside their own faith, and felt scorned by the churches they were used to. Many members of this congregation will recognise their stories, and thank God that they found this church, where no-one is a stranger. But every one of those other people I've come to know even now rejects the groundless arrogance of the atheist, and, while they might not know whether they believe any more, at least acknowledge that there might still be something to believe in.

These are the people, and we all know them, that all of us can help, just by guiding them through these doors, by introducing them over dinner to friends we've made here, by raving about the wonderful music we have, and the sense of warmth and excitement we feel here, and the challenge and satisfaction of our minister's sermons. After all, coming here on a Sunday morning is a lot more fun than flogging out to IKEA; and if they do come, and come again, they will start to question the nature of their faith, and suddenly realise that they have stopped questioning whether they have any faith at all.

Because these people are just lost, as surely as the child in the crowd, and need a guiding hand. They are as lost in this milling, secular world, as perhaps they were, and as many of us were, in early adulthood, when their confidence in their own wisdom and independence let them down, and they had to fall back on the unconditional love of their parents, and own up to folly and debt. They are lost in a struggle they cannot sustain on their own, and they need to hear again those precious words of forgiveness and love: It's time to come home.

It's time to come home, to your Father's house. And they can hear it, however tactfully expressed, from us.

Amen