

Sermon for 29 December 2024, Rev Bill Church

Gospel Reading Luke 2. 41-52

In the years before the First World War, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, whom we know better as Lenin, lived in London and worked in the Reading Room of the British Museum, which he much admired.

In later years, a researcher interviewed staff in the Reading Room, in the hope that they would have something illuminating to say about Lenin.

One of the attendants was shown a photo and said: "Oh yes, I remember him. A nice quiet studious gent. I never did hear what happened to him."

Well, that wouldn't happen in a modern biographical film, where at the end you get sententious titles saying things like "Brian went on to run a successful chain of restaurants" or "Fiona became the founder of a major bioscience company."

And it doesn't happen in the Gospels either where they all make clear right from the start who Jesus really is. But Mark and John say nothing about Jesus as a child and Matthew leaves a gap between the return of the Holy Family from Egypt to Galilee with Jesus aged about two, and his baptism by John aged about thirty. Luke offers only a little more with the very short account of Jesus in the Temple at age 12, read as today's gospel.

Any modern biography would be intensely interested in his relationship with Mary and Joseph and his siblings, his schooling if any and the trade he plied, his musical and artistic preferences and how the family fitted into the social and religious life of Galilee. But the Gospels are not modern biographies and we have to live with the scraps of information we have.

Luke tells us that Mary treasured what the shepherds told her at Bethlehem; when Jesus was presented in the Temple, Simeon blessed the child but told his mother that she too would be pierced to the heart.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is now 12, probably more grown up than a 12 year old today, quite likely already working in Joseph's business and already having an interest in the religion of his people and a good knowledge of it, hence talking with teachers in the Temple.

But was he "mild and obedient" as the Christmas carol alleges? (in what I think is a bit of Victorian parental propaganda). Maybe not, at least as far putting his destined mission above family, reflected also in other short episodes in the Gospels.

Later, in Matthew, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers are looking for him. "Who is my mother, who are my brothers?" Jesus asks and replies that it is those who do God's will.

I think any parent will have an acute sense of his parents' panic when they cannot find their young son (it has happened to me) and any parent will feel some indignation at his response when they finally do find him alive and well.

What we see is the beginning of the process that will separate Jesus from his family and lead to their distinctly ambiguous support for him. And we see Jesus beginning to sense that his mission will in the end part him from those originally nearest and dearest to him.

And we see Mary sensing this as well. It is she who chides him and she must have been fearing what this would mean for her family. And yet at the end she again treasures these memories in her heart.

We would dearly love to know more about the thirty years or so between Jesus as the baby in the manger and Jesus fully grown and fully formed for his ministry but apart from the scraps that Luke gives us, that would just be speculative. It would be fascinating but would it be helpful? Some early writers rushed to fill the gaps in Jesus' early life mostly with alarming and unedifying stories. Maybe it is best to leave that and concentrate on what the Evangelists have given, centring not on biography but on the world changing teaching, the brave death and glorious resurrection of the man who grew from the baby in the manger.