

First Sunday of Christmas 2018 (30.12.18)

1 Samuel 2: 18 – 20, 26; Luke 2: 41 – end

Well, far be it from me ever to shame anybody in public, so I'm not going to ask for a show of hands: but I wonder how many people here have already taken down their Christmas tree! I reckon there must be quite a few because by Thursday – that the 27th December; the third day of Christmas; 25% of the way to twelfth night – Facebook was full of posts like “tree and decs down, house back to normal . . . bliss.” That, by the way, just in case anybody is breaking out into a sweat, was not posted by anyone who, so far as I know, is a regular attender at the Priory. But there will be some here at whom I can wag my finger and whom I can denounce from the pulpit by declaiming “You sinners!”

It's still Christmas! And the story isn't over yet! The crib scene under the altar isn't even yet complete. The Wise Men haven't arrived yet. Last Sunday morning,

at the Nativity service they had begun their journey at the font (where all good journeys begin.) By Christmas Day they were making progress down the north aisle and were just this side of the north door. This morning they've arrived here by the pulpit. And it may be – but who am I to say? – that we shall find next week, by the beginning of Matins, they'll be half way up the choir stalls, just waiting to receive a helping hand from members of the congregation to enter the crib scene itself.

And of course, even then, even though the Priory's tree *will be* down by then, Epiphany conflates with Christmas: the crib will stay there, on display until Candlemas on February 3rd; and we shall have a full season, the same length as Lent, to celebrate *and reflect upon* the significance of Jesus' birth.

Except this morning's readings are not to do with Jesus' birth: they're to do with him being of the cusp of becoming a precocious teenager; and having his

poor earthly parents tearing their hair out worrying about him. So how does that fit in? Well it does. Because it helps us to reflect upon and get our heads round the sort of being this Christ-child, laid in a manger and all that, was born to be. In the course of the next few weeks, we're going to have to do some pretty hard work to chew over what we learn about God from the fact that he chose to become incarnate, chose to be born one of us. What we're going to have to chew over is this conundrum that Jesus is fully human *and* fully divine.

And this story of the 12 year old Jesus in the Temple gets us going on that conundrum. There can be no doubt that this is a God-story: it's written like a God-story; it's framed the way God-stories are; in fact in many ways it's a parallel of the first reading we heard this morning from 1 Samuel 2: we've got a mother and a father and a child; we've got an annual trip to the temple; we've got a return journey home (leaving the boy behind!); and we've got a boy growing in stature

and favour with the Lord, ready to assume his vocation.

Now the story of Jesus going to the Temple at 12 years old stands up on its own without 1 Samuel 2. You don't need ever to have heard 1 Samuel 2 to understand Luke 2: 41 – 52. But, if you *do* know your Old Testament, when you hear about Mary and Joseph making an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem and all the rest of it, the story about Samuel's parents acts like a spoiler alert. You say *Aha* - this is a God-story! This story has the shape that stories have when they're about how God's purposes are revealed.

But, it's a story about a very human human-being. Not only is Jesus as absolutely infuriating as 12 year olds are, but also he has to learn, he has to grow in understanding – even he – God's self in human form, the Word made flesh – he doesn't just lie in a manger vocation ready-formed, full of wisdom, full of knowledge. God fully self-empties himself to lie in

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that manger. He loves us so much that for our sake he becomes weak and defenceless and has to start from the bottom up to work out what his vocation is. And if he has to do that, we have to do the same: accept our weakness and defencelessness and our need to work at growing into what God wants of us.

Christmas is a time that arouses the religious sentiment in people. This year at the Priory, the Priory team have put on over the last eight days have attracted bumper congregations. We can't claim any credit for it: we're riding on a national trend. People want to come to church at Christmas. People have a thirst for the Christmas story. People are receptive to hearing the good news of peace and goodwill to all; and the call that goes with it to be Christ-like and to be people of peace and goodwill themselves. But that's not the complete Christmas story. Because Christmas isn't over yet. The story is still unfolding. And even as the trees *are* beginning to come down and the festivities are fading, the call persists of the Jesus who

shares our humanity for us to share with him a life of application to study and learning and growth.

Amen.