

EPILOGUE

The Twelve-Year-Old Jesus in the Temple

Besides the story of Jesus' birth, Saint Luke has preserved for us one further small and precious element of tradition regarding our Lord's childhood, in which the mystery of Jesus is illuminated in a very particular way. It is recounted that Jesus' parents went on pilgrimage every year to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. Jesus' family was devout: they observed the law.

In some portrayals of the figure of Jesus, the emphasis is placed almost exclusively on the radical aspects, on Jesus' challenge to false piety. Thus Jesus is presented as a liberal or a revolutionary. It is true that in his mission as Son, Jesus did introduce a new phase in man's relationship to God, opening up a new dimension of human intimacy with God. But this was not an attack on Israel's piety. Jesus' freedom is not the freedom of the liberal. It is the freedom of the Son, and thus the freedom of the truly devout person. As Son, Jesus brings a new freedom: not the freedom of some-

one with no obligations, but the freedom of someone totally united with the Father's will, someone who helps mankind to attain the freedom of inner oneness with God.

Jesus came not to abolish, but to complete (cf. *Mt* 5:17). This link between radical newness and equally radical faithfulness, rooted in Jesus' sonship, emerges clearly in the short narrative about the twelve-year-old: indeed, I would say it is the actual theological content that this story is intended to convey.

Let us return to Jesus' parents. The Torah laid down that every Israelite was to make an appearance in the Temple for the three great feasts—Passover, Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and Feast of Tabernacles (cf. *Ex* 23:17; 34:23f.; *Deut* 16:16f.). The question whether women were also obliged to make this pilgrimage was a matter of debate between the schools of Shammai and Hillel. As for boys, the obligation applied to them once they had completed their thirteenth year. But it is also laid down that they were to accustom themselves gradually to the commandments. One way of doing this was to make the pilgrimage at the age of twelve. The fact that Mary and Jesus also took part in the pilgrimage once again demonstrates the piety of Jesus' family.

We should also note the deeper meaning of the pilgrimage: by going up to the Temple three times a year, Israel remains, as it were, God's pilgrim people, always journeying

toward its God and receiving its identity and unity increasingly from the encounter with God in the one Temple. The holy family takes its place within this great pilgrim community on its way to the Temple and to God.

On the journey home, something unexpected happens. Jesus does not travel with the others, but stays behind in Jerusalem. His parents become aware of this only at the end of the first day's journey. For them it was evidently quite normal to assume that Jesus was somewhere among the group of pilgrims. Luke uses the word *synodía*—"pilgrim community," the technical term for the traveling caravan. Given our perhaps unduly narrow image of the holy family, we find this surprising. But it illustrates very beautifully that in the holy family, freedom and obedience were combined in a healthy manner. The twelve-year-old was free to spend time with friends and children of his own age, and to remain in their company during the journey. Naturally, his parents expected to see him when evening came.

The fact that he was absent when evening came no longer has anything to do with the freedom of young people, but points to a different level, as was to become clear: it points toward the particular mission of the Son. For the parents, this was the start of days filled with fear and anxiety. According to the evangelist, it was only after three days that

they found Jesus again in the Temple, where he was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions (cf. *Lk* 2:46).

The three days may be explained in quite practical terms: Mary and Joseph had spent one day traveling north, a further day was needed in order to retrace their steps, and on the third day they eventually found Jesus. While the three days are thus a perfectly plausible chronological indication, one must nevertheless agree with René Laurentin when he detects here a silent reference to the three days between Cross and resurrection. These are days spent suffering the absence of Jesus, days of darkness, whose heaviness can be sensed in the mother's words: "Child, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (*Lk* 2:48). Thus an arc extends from this first Passover of Jesus to his last, the Passover of the Cross.

Jesus' divine mission bursts through the boundaries of all human criteria and repeatedly becomes, in human terms, a dark mystery. Something of the sword of sorrow of which Simeon had spoken (cf. *Lk* 2:35) becomes palpable for Mary at this hour. The closer one comes to Jesus, the more one is drawn into the mystery of his Passion.

Jesus' reply to his mother's question is astounding: How so? You were looking for me? Did you not know where a child

must be? That he must be in his father's house, literally "in the things of the Father" (*Lk* 2:49)? Jesus tells his parents: I am in the very place where I belong—with the Father, in his house.

There are two principal elements to note in this reply. Mary had said: "Your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." Jesus corrects her: I *am* with my father. My father is not Joseph, but another—God himself. It is to him that I belong, and here I am with him. Could Jesus' divine sonship be presented any more clearly?

The second element is directly linked with this. Jesus uses the word "must," and he acts in accordance with what *must* be. The Son, the child, *must* be with his father. The Greek word *dei*, which Luke uses here, reappears in the Gospels whenever mention is made of Jesus' readiness to submit to God's will. He *must* suffer greatly, be rejected, be killed, and rise again, as he says to his disciples after Peter's confession (cf. *Mk* 8:31). He is already bound by the "must" at this early hour: he *must* be with the Father, and so it becomes clear that what might seem like disobedience or inappropriate freedom vis-à-vis his parents is in reality the actual expression of his filial obedience. He is in the Temple not as a rebel against his parents, but precisely as the obedient one, acting out the same obedience that leads to the Cross and the resurrection.

. . .

Saint Luke describes the reaction of Mary and Joseph to Jesus' words with two statements: "They did not understand the saying which he spoke to them," and "his mother kept all these things in her heart" (2:50, 51). Jesus' saying is on too lofty a plane for this moment in time. Even Mary's faith is a "journeying" faith, a faith that is repeatedly shrouded in darkness and has to mature by persevering through the darkness. Mary does not understand Jesus' saying, but she keeps it in her heart and allows it gradually to come to maturity there.

Again and again, Jesus' words exceed our rational powers. Again and again, they surpass our capacity to understand. The temptation to reduce them, to bend them to our own criteria, is understandable. Yet good exegesis requires of us the humility to leave intact this loftiness that so often overtaxes us, not to reduce Jesus' sayings by asking to what extent we can take him at his word. He takes us completely at our word. Believing means submitting to this loftiness and slowly growing into it.

Mary in this passage is presented quite consciously by Luke as the model believer: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord," as Elizabeth had said to her (*Lk* 1:45). With the observation that appears twice in the infancy narratives—that Mary kept the words in her heart (cf. *Lk* 2:19, 51)—Luke is pointing, as we have said, to the source on which he drew for his account. At the same time Mary appears not only

as the great believer, but as the image of the Church, which keeps God's word in her heart and passes it on to others.

"Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them . . . and Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (*Lk* 2:51f.). After the episode highlighting Jesus' higher obedience, he returns to his normal family situation—to the lowliness of the simple life and obedience toward his earthly parents.

To the saying about Jesus' growth in wisdom and stature Luke adds a formula taken from the First Book of Samuel, which in that context was a reference to the young Samuel (cf. 2:26): he grew in favor (grace, good pleasure) with God and man. The evangelist is once again making a connection between the story of Samuel and the story of Jesus' childhood, a connection which had first appeared in the *Magnificat*, Mary's hymn of praise sung on the occasion of her encounter with Elizabeth. This joyful hymn in praise of the God who loves the "little ones" is a new version of the prayer of thanksgiving with which Hannah, Samuel's hitherto childless mother, gave thanks for the gift of her son, by which the Lord had put an end to her affliction. In the story of Jesus—so the evangelist is telling us with this citation—the story of Samuel is being repeated on a higher plane, in a definitive manner.

. . .

It is also important to note what Luke says about Jesus' growth not only in stature, but also in wisdom. On the one hand, the answer of the twelve-year-old made it clear that he knew the Father—God—intimately. Only he *knows* God, not merely through the testimony of men, but he recognizes him in himself. Jesus stands before the Father as Son, on familiar terms. He lives in his presence. He sees him. As Saint John says, Jesus is the only one who rests in the Father's heart and is therefore able to make him known (cf. *Jn* 1:18). This is what the twelve-year-old's answer makes clear: he is with the Father, he sees everything and everyone in the light of the Father.

And yet it is also true that his wisdom *grows*. As a human being, he does not live in some abstract omniscience, but he is rooted in a concrete history, a place and a time, in the different phases of human life, and this is what gives concrete shape to his knowledge. So it emerges clearly here that he thought and learned in human fashion.

It becomes quite apparent that he is true man and true God, as the Church's faith expresses it. The interplay between the two is something that we cannot ultimately define. It remains a mystery, and yet it emerges quite concretely in the short narrative about the twelve-year-old Jesus. At the same time, this story opens a door to the figure of Jesus as a whole, which is what the Gospels go on to recount.