

Christmas is coming and goose is getting fat. Please put a penny in the old man's hat. So runs the jingle I remember from my own childhood.

I would suspect that the goose, or whatever graced your Christmas table, has been plucked clean and whatever pennies we had before Christmas have been well and truly depleted. Each year I would suspect we all ask at some stage or another, 'What is it all for?' and yet we have enjoyed the celebration, the coming together and the fact we make it that bit special with our special foods and other treats,

What is it all for, what is it all about is a question we might ask about the arrival of Jesus into the world. 'Who is this child?' Between now and Easter, in our worship Sunday by Sunday, we will be following the developing story of the public ministry of Jesus. Today, in our Gospel reading Luke presents us with the one account in the Gospels of Jesus as a growing child. We are told of a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It is a picture every parent could identify with – a missing child, the agony of searching, the relief, the hurt on finding and their son's response 'Sure, should n't you have known you would find me here?'

At face value, Jesus comes across as churlish, apparently indifferent to the concerns of his mother. We need to see this passage in the broader context of the Gospel of Luke. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include

any reference to Jesus in his growing years – so what broader point is Luke trying to convey. This is the fourth of four passages concerning Mary and her response to the coming of Jesus into her life. On each occasion she is presented as being puzzled. Puzzled at the meaning of the annunciation by the angel that she is to conceive and give birth to a saviour; puzzled at what the shepherds had to say about what they had heard the angels say concerning the birth of her son; puzzled at what the aged Simeon had to say about their son when she and Joseph went to present their first born son in the Temple; puzzled at what her son said to his father and her after their frantic search for him. Luke, at the end of his description of two of these said that ‘Mary treasured these words and kept them in her heart.’ I have a picture here of a woman mulling things over as she watched him grow, as she watched him embark upon his public ministry.

In a sense this puzzlement, this mulling over is part and parcel of our own response to the man this child is to become. His teaching is sometimes comforting, sometimes challenging, sometimes downright uncomfortable if not seemingly impracticable. To his contemporaries his behaviour could be outrageous in the company he chose to keep, the people he would share meals with; apparently more comfortable in the company of lepers and prostitutes than the religious leaders of his day.

As we were thinking on Christmas Eve, he is often far from the gentle Jesus, meek and mild that we would often be far more comfortable with. He is presented to us as one who broke moulds, who broke rules, who was very much an anti-establishment figure. Both the political and religious establishment of his day were threatened by him – which is why they wanted him out of the way.

Who is this man? An interesting and inspiring preacher, a man of great sympathy for the underdog and those on the margins – yes, there is no doubt he is all of these. But what marks him out from the host of itinerant preachers that roamed Palestine at that time? Why, 2000 years later, are we still following this man?

¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. *Luke 2:19*

To go back to our Gospel reading. The boy Jesus we are told was missing for three days until he is found. In contemporary Jewish thought, to be lost is synonymous with death, to be found is synonymous with life. Three days calls to mind the time he was to spend in the tomb before being raised from the dead. So even from the very start of his account of Jesus' life, the Gospel writer is planting very definite images of death and resurrection in our minds as we go on to read the story he has to tell us.

So as we embark upon our journey towards Good Friday and Easter we are invited to set out on a journey of reflection on who is this Jesus, born in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. He was to spend most of his life in obscurity, to embark upon a short public ministry of teaching and healing and die the death of a criminal and to be reported as risen from the dead.

‘Who is he?’ That is a question for us all to ponder in our own hearts – and that is the work of a lifetime.