

1st Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 35; Luke 2:41-end 27th December 2020 Christmas 1

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in
Your sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer*

A week ago, I listened to a Radio 4 game show, hosted by Jack Dee. One of the rounds asked the contestants to say a given phrase in the kind of language a teenager would understand. It was hilarious but revealed a sizeable gap between adults and young people trying to understand what each other were saying and meaning. Nothing new, I suppose but I started to wonder if this is what happened when Jesus went, with Mary, Joseph, family and friends, to the Temple in Jerusalem?

Dr. St. Luke was aiming for three things when he wrote this narrative, which does not appear in the other Gospels. Firstly, he wanted to inform, particularly Gentile, readers that Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem annually and was knowledgeable about its symbolic language and deeper significance. Around 12 years old, young people become adults in the Jewish Community by celebrating Bar Mitzvah, that is, Bar/Son of, the Mitzvah, the Laws. A girl becomes Bat Mitzvah, Daughter of the Law. It might be that this Jerusalem visit included Jesus' Bar Mitzvah celebration. As an adult, Jesus would be invited to read from the Torah scroll in Synagogue worship and deepen his faith journey by talking with Temple Rabbi's, once a year.

Secondly, as part of Luke's Gospel structure, the Temple is central. Key events in Luke's retelling of Jesus' life, death and resurrection take place in or around Jerusalem's Temple because it was, in Jesus' own words, 'My Father's house', his spiritual Home, if you like.

Thirdly, like the game show, this narrative reveals gaps opening up in communication. A gap between Jesus and his parents, as he was accepted into adulthood; a gap between what Jesus knew of his Heavenly Father and the teachings of the Temple Rabbis and Scribes and, scarily for us, a gap to comprehend that we, like Mary and Joseph, must urgently search for Jesus and listen to what he says.

Another thing you've probably noticed is that Jesus doesn't do or say what's expected. Mary and Joseph expected he was travelling home with them. It's a day before they notice his absence and three, terror-struck, days before they find him! As listeners, we have already guessed where Jesus might be but, Mary and Joseph's desperate search is for the benefit of the readers, who now know they too must seek out Jesus, until he is found. Luke's message is that Jesus had stayed to talk Mitzvah with the Rabbis and Teachers. He had studied Torah and Prophetic Writings to become Bar Mitzvah. He knew Isaiah's words and maybe wanted to know if the images

of hope and salvation after desolation had been understood by the Rabbis as being for all, and I mean ALL, peoples in every generation.

In Hebrew, 'Isaiah' means, '*Yahweh is salvation*', a succinct precis of the 40 chapters of First Isaiah. Historically, in the 8th Century BC, Isaiah, his wife and two sons lived when the monarchy was changing from bad to worse and armies were starting to hammer at Jerusalem's gates. Isaiah tried to warn the people that their behaviour had contributed to reasons why this was happening but, as no-one listened, it was hard to communicate consequences. He used what educationalists call, 'closing the gap' language and what the game show revealed, that there is always a gap in understanding between generations.

Isaiah used an abundance of natural images which all, and I mean ALL, generations would recognise; beautiful, upside-down language offering a gap-closer for remorseful people who understood the implications of living without rain or taps: *waters shall break forth in the wilderness; there will be streams in the desert, which shall blossom; the burning sand shall become a pool and thirsty ground, springs of water. Weak hands and feeble knees will be strengthened, blindness, deafness, not being able to speak or walk will be changed.*

Geologically, geographically and physically, none of these seemed possible BUT [in my view, BUT is God's favourite English word] they provided images of hope that things would be 'upside-down different' walking with, instead of away from, God. Nature alone contains the sights, smells, sounds, touch and tastes which can get anywhere near closing the gap between disobedient humanity and God's infallible righteousness, comfort and forgiveness. Maybe this is what understanding the Mitzvah taught Jesus. 'Closing the gap' was his response and, by default, is now ours.

Isaiah had called the Hebrews out because they had forgotten that God was, and remains, the 'God of Justice' before Peace and the 'God of Righteousness' before Mercy and Loving Kindness. God **will** strengthen the weak, give courage, bravery and fearless hearts to all, and I mean ALL, who ask, to each ones of us who unstintingly search for God's message of hope and salvation in the one who was born on Christmas Day and, at 12, listened to the Temple Teachers. If Jesus increased in wisdom and stature – so can we. Amen.

Lord, your wisdom echoes in the child's question, the raw insight of youth: renew our curiosity and deepen our desire for a truth that lives and grows before you, through Jesus Christ, the Question and the Answer. Amen.