

Luke's gospel, the gospel we will be mainly hearing from during this year of our 3 year lectionary, goes to great lengths to tell the story. Of course, all of the Gospels tell a story but Luke's gospel is particularly concerned with crafting a story. You see Mark's gospel feels as you read it that it is a rushed affair, a simple exercise of getting pen to paper and making a permanent record of Jesus' life and ministry. It is written at pace and with little attention to spinning a yarn – filling in the story, making it easy to read. Matthew's gospel is a story for the Jews and as such assumes a certain degree of pre-existing knowledge about the reader. Matthew expects his readers to know the Old Testament, to have read and contemplated the words of the prophets, to be living by the Law of Moses. Matthew is writing a 2nd volume, a new bit of Jewish history rather than a story. Then there's St. John who is something else entirely. He is a writer of scripture, his gospel is a holy book pulling together the facts of Jesus' life and interpreting them, thereby making theology rather than a story.

So what is different about Luke? Well Luke is a gentile, a foreigner and he is writing to Theophilous, another Gentile judging by the name. He makes no assumption of prior knowledge of Jewish prophesies or tradition, he is in no rush to get his story written down and he is a physician and not a theologian so he's not trying to produce a spiritual work. Luke is the gospel writer who is trying to reach you and me. He is St. Paul's companion writing for people outside the Middle East, outside Israel. And when writing to us we need to hear the whole story.

We are not able to draw on our memories for information about the messiah; we are not even expecting a messiah, that was the preserve of the Jewish nation. Yet Luke wants to tell the story of a messiah who has come for us all and he tells his story in a wonderful way always with meaning, never writing anything just because it's interesting. So why did Luke write about this incident in the temple when Jesus was a boy of 12?

Luke, as a storyteller, went to great lengths to talk about Jesus' conception and birth. He did so in a way that no other gospel writer did. Luke's is the gospel containing the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son John who was to become the Baptist, it talks of Mary visiting Elizabeth after her own miraculous conception and it tells of the long road to Bethlehem, the lack of accommodation and the visit of the shepherds to worship the child shortly after his birth. Luke gives us a genealogy of Jesus' family going right back to Adam, and hence to God and firmly places the events of his conception and birth in the specific place and time in history. He does this because of his audience, they want to know who this Jesus was. These people were not looking for a messiah from the root of Jesse, a descendent of King David – these characters weren't on their radar, they wanted to know who this man Jesus was and where he had come from.

After the birth narrative Luke tells of Jesus' presentation in the temple, the rite his parents went through to give thanks for his safe arrival and their meeting with Simeon and Anna who professed Jesus to be the chosen one. Luke is telling people about Jewish traditions because he has no expectation that they will be familiar to his readers. He then goes on to talk about Jesus in the temple, his Bar Mitzvah at the age of 12, his moving from a boy to a man and the in depth theological debate he became involved with there.

These are not just interesting facts about the child Jesus that help us to understand his character; these are specific incidents which point Jesus out as the messiah, as more than a man. They are proofs that Jesus was born this way and not later on made into a messiah. At his birth he is revealed as the messiah by the visit of the angels to the shepherds. At his presentation at the temple he is recognised for who he is by Simeon and Anna and at his Bar Mitzvah he begins to understand for himself who he is, while revealing it further to those around him including his parents, by his unfathomable natural understanding of scripture and ability to debate with the learned men of God.

This sort of theory became very important in the early days of the Church and the setting down of Christian doctrine. Several heresies began to circulate in the first few centuries after Jesus' resurrection and one of them was that of adoptionism. This was the theory that Jesus was born a normal child, to a normal family, no virgin conception, just created the old-fashioned way but at his baptism at the age of 30 God chose him to be his messiah – thereby adopting him as his son rather than him being born that way. Even before these debates had really got underway, St. Luke seems to be pre-empting them in his insistence that Jesus was revealed as the Son of God from his very conception.

Most 12 year olds think they know it all, think they understand the world around them perfectly and are not afraid to tell everyone else around them. Yet with most 12 year olds this confidence in their knowledge of the world is held in tension with their own teenage voyage of self discovery which will have them changing their opinion about just about everything and back again many times. In this respect, Jesus was different. Of everyone involved with his incident in the temple it was only Jesus who knew who he was. With no need of hormone induced teenage angst Jesus “found himself” at the event of his spiritual coming of age in the temple, close to God. It would be wonderful if we could promise that when we go through our closest equivalent to Bar Mitzvah, the confirmation course and sacrament that we practise in the Anglican Church much the same thing would happen to the usually teenage participants, avoiding the great and confusing journey of self discovery for our own young people. But if we've learned nothing else from Luke's gospel we should at least have learned that Luke is telling us a story of the son of God, not your average teenager.

So what is it then that we are to take from this story? There is of course, the fact that Jesus was seen as special before he was baptised and had begun to preach publicly. It is almost as if he was so different that he struggled to understand the rest of society's rules and was shocked that his parent's didn't know that he would be in the temple when they lost him. This is a story which demonstrates the divinity of Christ even during his childhood. But it is also a story which encourages us to look at scripture afresh, to renew our relationship with Jesus and to think about our faith. It is a story of a boy challenging the religious authorities and issuing a challenge to us. We think we know the stories of the Bible, we think we know the life of Jesus really well, we've read about it enough, but even the most learned are prone to learning something new from time to time. As we have considered the baby Jesus and now the child Jesus may we too be inspired to look again with open minds and hearts at what God teaches us today, in the hope and expectation of new revelations as we grow closer to him and journey in faith.