

# An unnecessary journey (that you have to make)

## Sermon for the First Sunday of Christmas, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2024

### Reading [Luke 2.41-52](#)

How time flies. Four days ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Now, in today's reading, he's already twelve years old. It's from Chapter 2 of Luke's gospel, and by Chapter 3 Jesus will be thirty years old. It's like what people say to parents of young children: make the most of it, because before you know it they'll be grown up and leaving home.

This story is the only one in the New Testament about Jesus' boyhood. Let's follow two threads: the significance of Jerusalem, and the Lost and Found business.

Why are Jesus and his family in Jerusalem, far from their home in Galilee? This is one of five journeys in the Christmas stories (six if you include the shepherds' short trip over to Bethlehem). Two of them are enforced: [according to Luke](#), Joseph and Mary have to go to Bethlehem to be registered, in obedience to the Roman imperial bureaucracy; and [according to Matthew](#), they have to flee the country with Jesus to avoid King Herod's killers.

These journeys find their echo every day in the news – the enforced evacuations in Gaza; and Sudan, which now has 'the largest displacement crisis in the world' [according to the UN](#).

The other Christmas journeys are happier, and they find modern echoes too: they are pilgrimages, and today's is one of those. No-one forces you on a pilgrimage, but you may feel you must go; it's an unnecessary journey that you have to make. But why?

In that overlong film, [The Hobbit – An Unexpected Journey](#), Gandalf the wizard offers Bilbo Baggins just that.

'You'll have a tale or two to tell when you come back,' he says.

'Can you promise that I will come back?' asks Bilbo.

'No; and if you do, you will not be the same.'

That is what significant journeys can do to you, and Jesus' parents make sure that this kind of journey is part of his life from the start. They take him to the holy city and its temple, the place where God's glory dwells, where heaven and earth come close to each other.

But then Jesus goes missing. What kind of moment is this? Is it like when former Prime Minister David Cameron and Samantha once left carrycot plus baby in a pub? No, this is more like [Home Alone](#), in which the parents are

halfway to Paris before they realise that their child is still at home in Chicago, because Mary and Joseph go a whole day before they start looking for Jesus.

It seems odd to us, but they are sure that Jesus is somewhere among their party, because they are part of a network of family members and friends that you can trust to look out for your kids as they would for their own. This time, though, the network doesn't work.

But then they find him, back in the temple with the scholars. He says he's 'in my father's house', or 'getting on with my father's business' – Luke's words carry both meanings. Either way, his parents don't understand, but Mary doesn't forget, either; we shall come back to that.

This is a signpost story, quite common in ancient biographies. The author describes a single moment in childhood that points to what the person will become. And these moments still happen.

In the Robbie Williams biopic [Better Man](#), we see him, aged eight, crooning to Frank Sinatra with his dad, then telling his grandmother while she gives him a bath, 'I don't want to be nobody.'

When Taylor Swift was twelve, a computer engineer working at their home taught her three guitar chords, and set her off writing her own songs. If the Swift computer hadn't packed up, how might things might have turned out?

[Since preaching the sermon I have discovered that [accounts of this episode differ](#). RT]

I remember Will, someone from a previous parish, who told me how one day when he was a small boy, he got dressed up and said to his mother, 'Mummy, I'm not me.' He went on to become an actor.

There is so much in this story for us to ponder on the brink of a new year, a natural time to look back and look ahead.

So, first: if you are a younger worshipper, ask your adult on the way home: do you have a personal Jerusalem, a place where the deep stuff of life comes into focus for you? And is that a pilgrimage we might share?

A personal Jerusalem need not be geographical place (though it might be) and the pilgrimage need not be a physical one. It can be about words on a page, sounds in the air or paint on canvas; wherever or whatever it is that makes earth and heaven come close together, and the deep things come clearer.

Second, signposts. When Will said, 'Mummy, I'm not me', it was his mother who remembered it, and reminded him. She was like Mary, who (we hear) keeps a mental treasure chest of all the things about Jesus as he grows.

That is such a good thing to do. Never has it been so easy to have a picture record of children as they grow up, but what about the things they say and do

– perhaps here in [Young Church](#) – when there is no smartphone to record it, just ears and eyes and memory? These are precious things. One may be a signpost to what is to come.

And finally – this for our older worshippers – indulge yourself a moment. Imagine someone writing your biography. What childhood episode might they choose to show the person you would become? Or might still become?

If you can think of something, ponder it. What was it that God was bringing to birth in you then? And what has become of it, this child of your soul? Have you nurtured it over the years? Or (if you're honest) has it gone missing? And if it has, might this new year be the time to go searching?

All good questions for these dying days of 2024. Their aim is self-discovery, self-realisation, but not in a free-wheeling, self-help book sense. This is discovery of the self – the you, the me – that God knows. Today's story suggests that we best discover ourselves by looking for Jesus, who is always about his Father's business, so that we can be about it too.

And the promise of this place is that here, as in the coming year of Sundays our Bible readings unfold Jesus' story for us, the promise is that here *he* may find *us*; and so this place may become our Jerusalem, the place where heaven and earth come close.