

2 The Child Jesus

Luke 2

A decree was issued by Augustus Caesar, for all the world to be registered for taxation. Everyone was to register in their own town, and Joseph, being of the family of David, of Bethlehem, went up there from Nazareth in Galilee, taking Miriam with him, his wife, who was heavily pregnant. While they were there, her time came, and she gave birth to her first-born son. She wrapped him in birth-clothes and laid him in the feeding box, because there was no room for them in the house.¹

There were shepherds in the area camping out in the fields and guarding their flocks thru the nite. Suddenly, the Lord's messenger stood before them. The glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel sed to them: "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news – joy for all the people. To you there is born today a Savior: the Christ, the Lord." (2: 1 – 11)

In the hour of Jesus' birth a Savior was proclaimed. But we should not too easily assume that we know what "savior" and "salvation" mean. Luke, who draws on all the history of Israel, is careful to draw the picture from many traditions and expectations: from the Books of the Law assurance of God's faithful commitment to Israel, his promise to Abraham; from history the memory of a great and worthy King and the hope of triumph over powerful enemies; from the tales of Israel's tribal infancy and from the prophets, the hope of reconciliation and forgiveness, healing for the sins of a people who have set themselves against God. Salvation is freedom and independence, honor under the protection of God; it is good order and honest government; it is reconciliation and healing: there is no single definition, no simple unity in the idea of salvation, only in the one who brings it: Yeshua, the son of Miriam, Jesus of Nazareth.

In the hour of Jesus' birth angels filled the sky with their proclamation: Glory to God in the heavens, in the utmost realms of transcendent reality; and down on the earth, where people live in small, crowded houses and share their space with useful animals, peace to humankind who live, even here, in the favor of God. Joseph and Miriam had come to Bethlehem, where Joseph's (and perhaps Miriam's) relations lived, but, being poor, they had little space for

¹ In "Jesus Messiah" I dwelt with some enthusiasm on the traditional popular image of an Inn. I have learnt since that a better understanding of the Greek text suggests that it refers to a poor family house, with a feeding box attached to a wall for the family's animals. Cf The New English Bible (2:7) and the note in the New Jerusalem Bible.

visitors. When Miriam's child was born they put it to rest, after the womb, in a feeding box set up for the animals.

And out in the nite, on the hillside pastures where the shepherds were keeping watch over their little flocks, angels both frightened and gladdened them with the good news, for the very glory of God shone around them, and, like the priest in the Temple, they were afraid. But, as with the priest, the angel reassured them:

“Don't be afraid. I bring you good news and joy for all the people. Today in David's town a savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.” (2: 10 – 11)

This is the angels' third and final proclamation. Their declaration of who he is, the One they proclaim, is meant to stand as a banner over the whole story that follows. He is the Savior; he is the Messiah, the Lord. How we understand and remember this will be decisive for our understanding of the gospel, and Christian history shows that if we do not understand and remember it as Luke intended, the message is in danger of falling apart, of dwindling into mere heresy. He will not be the Savior except as Messiah and Lord. If we imagine salvation in any other way than under his rule as Messiah and Lord, “salvation” will become the work of our imagination only and not the act of God.

He is the Christ, that is, the anointed one, the Messiah.² He is the One to whom Israel has long looked forward as a king to rule them well, to establish the good order that is truly God's will for them, and to give them forever freedom from fear and oppression. And he is the “Lord”, the “Kyrios” that is, the rightful ruler of the people. It is as such that he will be Israel's Savior. To understand and receive the salvation he brings, we will have to know and receive him as Messiah and Lord. That is the very proclamation of heaven.

Salvation is freedom and rescue, the arrival of help at last, to a people in dire need. But it is not the cavalry galloping over the crest of a hill to the cheers of hard-pressed settlers. It is not the soul-stirring skreel of the bagpipes announcing at last relief for the besieged and battered fortress. It is not the arrival of a dashing super-hero. It is something more strange and unexpected, something from beyond the familiar bounds of our understanding. We do not know what to make of it and our first reaction is to be afraid. The experienced priest was afraid; the faithful young woman of Nazareth was alarmed by the angel's greeting; the tough shepherds, ready to do battle with wild dog or robber, were afraid at the breaking of God's news.

² “Christos” is the Greek equivalent of “Messiah” or, in English, “anointed”. The other term, “kyrios” means “lord”, “master”, “ruler” or “teacher”. We will explore it more fully in chapter 24

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More than any other, the gospel according to Luke has been misused to undermine the story of Jesus the Savior, the Messiah and Lord. Afraid of the gospel's implications, many of us have cut the story of Jesus' birth away from the rest and made it a pretty picture that represents all we have to say, all we want to say, about Jesus. Needless to say, we have had to dismantle Luke's gospel to do this and grossly distort even the part we keep.

The stable, the manger, the singing angels, the shepherds, three kings borrowed from Matthew: they have become a sweet, romantic tableau, a once-a-year celebration of sentimentality. But the great theme songs of the piece, his mother's revolutionary proclamation and the priest's dawn of change and repentance, have been sidelined off into liturgical chants, made so solemn and routine by performance that they are quite out of place at Christmas. Repentance is a Lenten, not a Christmas theme, and the only radical change required here is the one recommended to the children:

Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as he.

– a very satisfying state of affairs for parents and teachers, but not conducive to progress, adventure, maturity, discovery or any of the lively gifts of God.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and even his family's relations could give him no particular room. He was born wherever they could make some space for his mother, and put into the animals' feeding box. Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head. And, if he was like any newborn baby, his little, wrinkled and ugly head, beautiful only to his mother and to those who are caught up emotionally in the miracle of the birth. He was not the six-month or twelve-month-old cherub represented in Christian art or in a modern nativity crib.

Nor was he God pretending to be a baby. In that little, vulnerable mind there was not the vast knowledge and wisdom of God but only inarticulate consciousness, shocked by birth into a radically new awareness of needs, sensation and exposure. Luke gives us no reason for imagining a baby more knowing than any baby. It is the people round about who know and speak and do things; the baby just lies, a helpless cry of needs, in the feeding box. If we are to understand the reality of Jesus, the human being, and the reality of God in him, we must let the gospel tell us, and not foist our doctrines prematurely upon the story.

So, gentlemen, God rest you merry, for here is good news for you and for all the people. In the little town of Bethlehem, in David's royal city, a son is born to us and a child is given to us, and if he is only a little

body asleep, exhausted by the struggles of birth, or a writhing, screaming, red-faced demand for nourishment, be not dismayed, for here, in the mercy and the wisdom of God, is our Lord and Savior. Here in a silent and holy nite the Messiah is born of Miriam. Among the darkened houses of Bethlehem there dawns the everlasting lite of God's salvation. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in this place tonite.

Come all you faithful, joyful and triumphant, for Godself calls you to see the wonder of your salvation, to come without fear to the Savior himself and to see him, lying in a bed of straw, not a warrior or a statesman but an infant lowly whose world, for the moment, is a brest full of milk and a manger full of hay. The wonder of this birth will never be exhausted. Well mite angels fill the sky and glory shine around, for this is the nite when God gives us our Savior, born as helpless as we are, but born to bring the strength and comforting of God. Tonite it begins, the work of the mercy of God, the wonder of the coming of God to rescue us; tonite, even in the cramping blackness of nite, the lite is shining. Hail thou ever-blessed morn! Hail redemption's happy dawn! Sing thruout Jerusalem, Messiah is born in Bethlehem!

Triumph and joy, but it is a revelation to be cherished and shared and pondered over. It is not a spectacle to gape at, but an experience to learn from. It is the experience of God's utter reliability, God's faithfulness. When God communicates, it is the truth, however unexpected, and those who respond to God's word (not those who formulate it into doctrines and take up cudgels to defend them) discover that God is faithful. Miriam, who experienced most and heard most, stored it in her heart and pondered it. The shepherds, who had gone to the house in Bethlehem because the angel told them, found that it was all just as they had been told. There were no further miracles - only a baby in the feeding trof, but it was just as they had been told. And if they have been told that this is the Savior of Israel, that too will be true.

And what have we been told, by Luke? That a baby is born in a poor family house in Bethlehem? Yes. But what about this baby? That he is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. We have been told, in the story that leads up to his birth, and particularly in the songs that foretell him, who and what he will be, the impact he will have on the world. But do we believe? Do we expect to find that what we have been told is true, or just a beautiful idea? Many of us (us Christians I mean) don't want to believe what Luke has told us. The baby bit and the angels and the shepherds is all right, and we've managed to make the idea of a Savior very comfortably other-worldly, but, by and large, we don't want to remember the great proclamations that set his birth in the context of Israel's history and society, and the future of the world.

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Miriam and Zechariah proclaimed a savior who would overturn the world, and altho we're happy with the overturning of the world as long as it's left general like that (so we can each interpret is as overturning the world we don't like) we don't like to be told what exactly will be overturned, what is going to change and what will take its place. So we drop several things that Luke has told us out of the Christmas story. The proclamation of the angels gets into the carols, but the songs of Miriam and Zechariah do not. Yet it is they that give the angels' message its substance and significance, and without their interpretation, the song of the angels "Glory to God in the highest heavens, and on earth peace to human kind" is only a general picture of glory and benevolence without the power and the challenge of the gospel.

Salvation is from God, and in God's plan, we are rescued from our enemies and from fear of our enemies, to enter into the space and freedom of God, to be a just, happy and clean society even in the eyes of God. But that isn't what we want, not as a people and a nation, and it was to Israel as a people and a nation that the Christmas message was spoken. If it is spoken to us too, it is to us as a people and a nation, who are to be changed as a society, to receive from God an utterly new way of being a people and a society.

And that is what we don't want. We expunge it from the Christmas story, omitting the dangerous proclamations of Miriam and Zechariah. For if we are indeed to be set free from fear, how will our rulers rule us? If we cannot be threatened with the dangers of witchcraft, the mob, the anarchists, fascism, communism, terrorists, how will our governments, our bomb-makers and our asset-grabbers get us to cooperate with their plans for a strong society? Who will let Mr Brown spend forty billion pounds on a pair of aircraft carriers and another twenty billion on a nuclear missile system, if we are no longer afraid of our enemies? How will the President and the Prime Minister harness our prisons and legal systems to the "national interest" unless we are kept in terror of the terrorists? There will be chaos if, in our days, God fulfils his promise to Abraham and grants us to live without fear all the days of our life. We can't be ruled, even in a democracy, without fear.

And if the rich are sent away empty-handed, who will build us a thriving growth economy? That isn't Washington's or Westminster's program. We need the rich, and we need to reward the rich. We need them to invest in our society in the fullest possible expectation of going away with their hands full. Miriam must not be allowed to inject her political and economic interpretations into the Christmas story. In our program, the only food for the hungry is what spills from the troughs of the rich. If the feeding box has a baby in it, there will have to be another, bigger feeding box, stocked with rewards for enterprising money-makers.

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When Jesus was few days old, he was taken to be “circumcised” in accord with the Jewish custom, to have the foreskin of his penis cut away. It was a sign of inclusion, of belonging to his people. By this ritual his parents acknowledged that he, too, was heir to the promises God made to Abraham, that he, too, was a Jew, of the Jewish people.

Then, after another month, when the time of his mother’s purification was complete, Luke tells us, carefully, how his parents brought him to Jerusalem to fulfil the law of Moses. For the law told them how to honor their people’s custom which Godself had given them. When the first child, opening the womb, is a male child,³ he is to be considered as belonging to God, and a sacrifice must be offered to God on his behalf. For the poor, the offering might be as little as two pigeons, but it was their humble recognition that God gave life and fertility, that God who had made and fulfilled them owned the fruit of their bodies.

All this was done, as Luke reminds us, in accordance with the law of Moses, the one who had given God’s law to Israel. Jesus’ parents had followed faithfully the custom of their people, into whose ways and fellowship Jesus was now committed. They had carried out obediently what is written in the Law.⁴ We don’t take enough notice of the point. God’s way for Jesus, and the way accepted for him by his parents is the way of the Jewish people, for he is one of his people.

In Christian custom, those rites of initiation have been replaced by baptism, but clumsily, because baptism involves a profound commitment of adult faith. Its use as a ritual for the welcoming of children into their community has put the church into a mess of conflicting practices. Not only has it become unclear what believers mean by their baptism ceremonies, but others, non-believers and undecided spectators, are caught up in the confusion. Most people, and society as a whole do not profess a faith that repents and turns from the way of the world into the very different way of Jesus Christ (which is what baptism expresses). But many still find the ritual necessary for naming and celebrating their children. The church that claims (in practice) the sole privilege of conducting the rite, is torn by the contradictions between trying to welcome parents and new-born children, and requiring, for the integrity of baptism, some commitment of faith in Jesus Christ. It leads to many arguments, many hard decisions, and a great deal of lame ambivalence: neither the sacred commitment of faith and culture that circumcision was, nor the conscious act of repentance and commitment to Christ that Baptism was.

³ Exodus 13: 1 - 2; 11 - 16

⁴ Luke 2: 39

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It's an issue I don't mean to discuss here, because Luke's gospel does not raise it – as it applies to us. But the story of Jesus' circumcision and the later ritual of purification and redemption, does tell us something important about the practice of initiation, which the church, in many societies, woefully bungles.

I will give one example. The Fataluku people of East Timor (and I would guess other people there as well) have a traditional welcoming and naming ritual for the new born. It involves the family, and especially its elders. In this ritual, coconut water (vata ira) is put on the shaven head (ca'u peu) of a baby. There is also a celebratory meal to which people important to the baby's future (a little like godparents) are invited. It is a very expressive and meaningful ritual of initiation, just as circumcision was for Jesus' parents, his society, and so for Jesus himself.

The church (in East Timor it's particularly the Roman Catholic Church) has failed to respect this tradition and has sought (as is the way with most "missionary" churches from Europe) to replace the native tradition with the European one of Christening, failing to learn from or acknowledge the example of Jesus' parents, as Luke has shown it to us.

That example is one of whole-hearted acceptance of one's own society, even by one who has come to challenge and to change it. Later (in the "Acts of the Apostles") Luke himself will tell us how circumcision and other practices of the Law became a major issue for the first Christians, and how, after much argument, it was firmly and definitely decided that circumcision was not a necessary ritual for Christians and that the Law did not apply to them as it applied to Jews. It belonged to the specifically Jewish and was appropriate only for those among Jesus' followers who were Jews.

So it is particularly significant that he draws so much attention to the pious observance of Jesus' parents and to Jesus' traditional entry into his own community. Luke is concerned to show us the continuity of history, not just as a succession of events, but as a belonging together of people in their culture and their shared identity. This history into which Jesus is initiated flows forward into the history of salvation for all the peoples, and Jesus, for his part, is committed to it by the Law and by the obedience of his parents.

The incident doesn't give us a command, but it gives us a powerful example. In following Jesus, and in showing others how to follow Jesus, we need to begin with a solid affirmation of who we are and the people with whom we belong. Every people, every culture that comes to acknowledge Jesus should be encouraged to use its own welcoming ritual for children, not a borrowed European one, any more than the

gentiles of Europe were obliged to follow the Jewish one. New Christians should see in the example of Jesus' parents God's blessing for their own traditional rituals.

Often the church's practice (and in many other places than East Timor, and among many other denominations than the Roman Catholic) has been to deny native identity and to try to replace it with a supposed "Christian" one (but in reality a subservient colonial one, a second-class European culture). Baptism is made not an act of mature repentance and commitment to Jesus Christ, but surrender to the church's superior control (often meaning control by the clergy) and acknowledgement by parents and family that not their own traditional culture but a dominant alien one will rule the life of their child.

The way of salvation is not like this. It is the way that begins (for salvation was already dawning when Jesus was still in the womb) with humble and grateful affirmation of the people we are, of the life God has given us in the society where we already belong, as soon as we are born. The true affirmation of the gospel would be the "Ca'u peu" and the "Vata ira" of the Fataluku, and the corresponding traditional ceremonies of other tribes and peoples, carried out in the consciousness, that Jesus, too, began this way and that already, in honouring our people and our origins, we are following him.

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It was a day of revelation when Jesus was presented in the temple. Among the inhabitants of Jerusalem there was an old man named Simeon, a devout man, who waited on the coming of Israel's Savior. The Spirit of God was with him, and had promised him that he would not die until he had set eyes on God's Messiah. On this day the Spirit led him to come to the temple, where, seeing the child, he took him into his arms and blessed God for the promise fulfilled:

Lord, dismiss your servant now, to depart in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, revealed for all the nations to behold - a light to end the darkness of the gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel. (2: 29 - 32)

There was an old woman who lived in the temple. A widow, her ancient life was now dedicated to God, and she never left the temple. She was a prophet, that is, she understood the message of God and spoke it to the people. She came by while Simeon was speaking and she began to praise God, speaking of this child as an answer to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem! In the temple where the story of Jesus' birth began, it now concludes with a message of encouragement for all who love Jerusalem: Here, in this child, is God's answer for all those who are

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waiting for the liberation of Jerusalem. Perhaps, it's because of the mity and mythical ring of the name – Jerusalem – that we are not shocked by this verse. What more fitting than this promise that the salvation to come will be the salvation of the city, Jerusalem? Jerusalem the holy, the faithful city, the ancient, the house of God, the tower of David, the home of God's people, the long-suffering, the disobedient, the faithless, the whore, Jerusalem shall be redeemed, as prophets had promised thru many disappointing generations of kings. Jerusalem is to be saved, and now her time has come.

But we ought to be shocked. Jerusalem is a city, a people joined together as a political entity. It is a social construction, an administrative and economic operation, a place of and for the fulfilment of civic life and government. Jerusalem is not an individual soul, the proper candidate, according to many of our theologies, for salvation. How can Jerusalem be redeemed?

Luke doesn't explain, because the problem hasn't even occurred to him. Neither he nor his readers would have suffered from the narrow and individualistic ideas of salvation that have too often predominated in the later church. For him, there can be no notion of a salvation that leaves out the city, the polis, the political and economic dimension of human kind, for we are, irreversibly, political creatures. We are who we are in our coming together and relating to one another, in our use of, our dependence on, our service of one another. The organisation of such relationships, in political, civic, economic life is the expression and matrix of our humanity and we cannot stand outside of it.

Jerusalem is to be saved. The city, and the economic, religious, political concourse of which it is constituted are to be redeemed. God's people will be saved not as contiguous individuals, but as a nation, a city, a people redeemed together, a people belonging together as they belong to God. Old Anna is as political as young Miriam: salvation will be the changing of political and economic ways; it will be the long-awaited liberation of the city.

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There remains one more story of Jesus' childhood, and this too takes place in Jerusalem. When he was twelve years old, he went down with his parents from Nazareth to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. It was their regular custom. This year, they were returning home and had gone a day's journey, when they discovered that Jesus was not with them. It seems that people travelled in large caravans, made up of people from the same area of the country, with many friends and relations together. Until the end of the day, his parents assumed that Jesus was somewhere in the caravan, but then, when they went looking for him, he was nowhere to be found.

They returned to Jerusalem and were looking for him there for three days before they found him at last, in the Temple. There he was, sitting with the teachers, listening and asking questions, and everyone was amazed at the intelligence of his words. The dramatic scene has caught the imagination of artists and film-makers, but it's one that needs just a touch of deconstructing.

It was normal, of course, for "teachers", scholars, scribes and other experts in God's Law, to meet in the temple for discussion, and it was normal for people to gather round and listen for it didn't happen in closed seminar rooms, but in open porticos and busy courtyards. If a young lad of twelve was in the group, I guess that would be unusual but not outlandish. I do not believe that when Jesus asked questions and gave answers that amazed the learned he was showing off, drawing on divine or superhuman knowledge to outshine men who had spent a lifetime studying the scriptures. I think that what "amazed" them would have been a level of knowledge, intelligence and insight that was remarkable in a twelve-year-old boy. No more. Luke tells us later that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, as young men do; and all that growing was still ahead of him. (He also tells us later that Jesus rejected the temptation to show off in the temple.) He was not God pretending to be a remarkable boy, but a twelve-year-old boy. (I shouldn't be surprised if he was also a bit grubby and torn, after three days living rough, and without his mother to remind him about the finer details of washing.)

His parents were very put out, and his mother reproached him: "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been very worried, looking for you." But he answered: "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I would be in my Father's house?"

The answer works at different levels. At the simplest level, Jesus had done what a sensible child should do. When lost, you don't go wandering about hoping to find someone. You go and stay in a likely place waiting to be found. Jesus had gone to the temple, his Father's house, and stayed there. So why hadn't his parents looked for him there first? We should perhaps remember that although they lived in Nazareth, up in Galilee, they were a Judean family with roots in Bethlehem and a cousin married to a temple priest. They had perhaps thought of several relations and acquaintances to enquire with, before they found Jesus in the temple.

The Greek wording of Jesus' answer "in my Father's house" could also mean "engaged in my Father's work" and it is sometimes taken that way: Jesus announcing that he had stayed behind in the temple because it was time for him to get started on his Father's work. But I don't think that can be the intention, because Jesus then responds as

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if he really had been left behind accidentally. He returns with them to Nazareth, to live quietly there, subject to them as his parents.

Luke is a delicate and careful storyteller, and I believe he has deliberately chosen words which, in his language of Greek, suggest the idea of Jesus doing his Father's work, even tho, for the present, they are only saying that he is in his Father's house.

For the really important issue, the word that grabs us in Jesus' reply, is his recognition of God as his Father. Miriam, for all the wonders of his conception and birth, has just plainly and pragmatically referred to Joseph as his father, clearly the relationship in which the builder from Nazareth stood with Miriam's child. But Jesus is deeply aware that God is his Father and speaks of the Temple as his Father's house. His parents had enquired, perhaps, at the houses of many relations, but they had failed to realise that Jesus knew his first and closest relation, his Father, to be God.

Even as a child – and I say deliberately “even as a child” for Jesus grew in awareness and self-awareness like any human child – Jesus was deeply and confidently aware of a close and powerful relationship with God, beyond what was claimed for even the greatest of the prophets and saints of Israel. It was no religious platitude to claim God as your father. The notion had only ever been used as a metaphor, or a poetic exaggeration. The prophet Hosea had spoken of God as a father to Israel, a tender-hearted father deeply attached to his child, the whole nation of Israel. One of the psalms, celebrating the coronation of a king, gives God's endorsement of Jerusalem's new ruler in these terms:

“You are my son; today I have begotten you.” (Ps 2: 7)

But what is given in the scriptures as a metaphor or a poetic extravagance, hi-liting a father-like quality in God's relationship with his people and their rulers, is claimed by Jesus as a sober fact and condition of his being, personal, intimate and unique: God is his Father. The child, separated from his effective parents, the builder and his wife, goes to the house of his closest relation, his real Father. The God of Israel, whose house is the temple, is that Father.

As I mentioned before, we can be tempted to bring our theological conclusions into our reading of the gospel, insted of letting the gospel relate to us in its own way an experience of the acts of God. The theology of our Christian faith is a living, growing experience of God, and it needs to be renewed from time to time by returning to the earlier records, to hear them again and to taste again their original inspiration. But if we are to hear them, we must let them re-present to us familiar ideas in a way that later development may have made unfamiliar.

We should not bring to the gospel a ready-made doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. For the doctrine, even if true, is always our attempt to reduce the vision given to us in the scriptures to something we can handle, something defined, from which we can draw doctrinal conclusions. Which is all very necessary in its place, but it should never become the whole story, for when it does, our theology dies, to become no more than the application of theology – which is a living, experienced reality – to the static realm of doctrine and its logic.

The gospels were written by people who lived, received, felt and knew theology, the experience and revelation of the living God. They drew on the experience and the memories of people who had lived in that revelation, to build and share a wider, more truthful experience. And that is how they should engage us. We should come to the gospels as to an encounter with Jesus whom they know and report, in their way and terms, for only then is our awareness and appreciation of him enlarged and deepened. If we bring to the text a ready-made knowledge of Jesus, we will only find that same knowledge coming back to us, confirmed perhaps, but not more or deeper than it was.

Jesus was aware of God as his Father, and he made that awareness known to others, as a statement about himself. The “divinity of Christ” (but that is a very clumsy way of describing it at this stage) begins not as an ontological but as a relational idea. We don’t know what it means to “be God”. We don’t even know what it means to “be a human being”, as a something, as an ontological reality; and we don’t yet know what it is to be Jesus. We are learning. We learn about all of these only as we live our lives as an encounter with God in Jesus, and in that encounter we are helped by the scriptures, written by others to tell us what the encounter taught them.

Luke tells us that Jesus went back with his parents to Nazareth, where he “grew in stature, wisdom and grace before God and men”. Luke began his story in the midst of family issues – a barren woman being given a child – and then he told us of a young woman engaged to be a builder’s wife, whose first child would be born of God without a human father.

The Spirit of God will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; so that the holy one born of you will be called the Son of God. (2: 35)

But if Jesus is “called the Son of God” simply because his birth was brought about without a human father, we might think it merely a negative idea, the recognition of a miracle that was over and done with at the birth. So Luke has given us his account of the twelve year-old Jesus, emphasising how he grew and matured within the context of a family and a community, with a father from whom he would learn the

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meaning of “father”, even if that meaning was taken over and enhanced in his experience of God.

The relationship between him and God is growing as the relationship between a father and his child can and should grow. This child is the “son” of Joseph and Miriam, and will be subject to them as such, but already he feels at home in the house and the work of his Father, God. And from that beginning he continues to grow, in the company of God as well as the company of people.