

Let's have a brief look this morning at our reading.

Mary and Joseph are clearly a devout family. Every year they went to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. As a twelve year old, Jesus went with them. It would have been a particularly important year for the family, because when Jesus would reach 13 the Jewish tradition would celebrate him moving from childhood to adulthood – his Bar-Mizpah. So as a family Mary & Joseph would be modelling their custom and practices which Jesus would then continue for himself in the years to come.

After the feast was over, Mary and Joseph began the trip back home, to Nazareth. And it was usual for people to travel in a big group, also known as a caravan, because it was safer. I picture Mary and Joseph traveling with their extended family, friends, and fellow Jews who lived up north. In groups like these, the adults would often walk together, and the children would separate into their own group to play, just as children do today. It was a three-day walk back to Nazareth, and so it would have only been after the first day of travelling that they would have probably noticed that Jesus was missing.

In this past year I feel that many people have been distracted with the issues around them, and all are very valid – COVID, our livelihoods, loneliness, and other things. But in it we probably have missed the opportunity to be close to Jesus to the extent we could have been. In our story Mary and Joseph evidently got so concerned and focused with the journey back home that they failed to pay attention to Jesus, to be sure he was with them as they went.

Have you ever thought about that moment when Mary and Joseph, after having walked a days journey, they stop and realise that Jesus is not with them. There's a huge lesson for us to learn as we try to move from this period of COVID back into some normality again. There's an important task for all of us to take stock and assess where Jesus is in our lives. Are we really worried about where he is or where he's currently missing? I cannot overstate the importance of these moments of taking stock of our spiritual inventory, especially when we all have a few days of opportunity right now between Christmas Day and New Years Day, before the busyness of life kicks in again. And whatever we find, it's important to be awake to it. We must be fully honest with ourselves about the state of our faith. We might find that our earthly existence has become centered on something less than Christ. What if Mary and Joseph had kept so focused on getting back to Nazareth, that day after day they never looked for Jesus? They might have reached Nazareth before finding out. The difficulty in finding him again would have been that much greater because they were much further away from him. Similarly if we concentrate entirely on the issues that are affecting us so much at the moment, and not take the time to assess where Jesus is in our daily living, then the steps back to finding him may be more difficult the longer we leave it and the further we travel away from him. A recent study by Evangelical Alliance has shown that church goers are moving more into a pattern of monthly attendance, and for me that's not good. There are a number of families that we haven't seen since the first lockdown, and whilst I understand the challenges we face, I worry about the long journey that many will have to get back into the pattern of corporate worship again. In fact I fear that they may never return.

For many of you there's that deep down honest assessment needed that says that we've taken our eyes off Christ; that he isn't the bee-all and end-all of everything in our lives. But the hard fact is that he **must** become the be-all and end-all of everything.

One of the things that makes this story so memorable and delightful, is the picture of Mary and Joseph searching for Jesus. We see them moving night and day anxiously searching everywhere along the road. We see them looking all through Jerusalem. After three days of sleepless and sorrowful effort, they find him at last. And they realize that he stayed behind on purpose, which is likely to make them even more upset. But his answer to them is priceless: "You didn't need to worry, or work so hard to find me. Where else would I be, but right here in my father's house?"

Even at a young age, Jesus knew that he was on this earth for a greater purpose – he had a divine mission to fulfill. And part of that mission was spending time in God's Word – listening to the teachers, asking them questions, filling himself with the words and promises of God.

Ultimately, this twelve year old boy would grow up, carrying out his Father's business. But even more importantly, Jesus would someday be about his Father's business by dying on a cross. Yes, he was still a good son to his parents, but he had a greater mission, a more important, divine mission – to be about his Father's business as the Saviour of the world. That was his number one priority.

I wonder in this period of assessment as one year closes and another one is looming, have you realised your purpose in God? Have you taken the time to ask where Jesus is placed in this coming year within your priorities? We are not just here to work, pay bills, raise kids, socialize etc. That really is not why God has placed you and me here. You have a greater purpose, and that is to "be about your Father's business."

Jesus actually makes finding him pretty simple, but we like Mary and Joseph have to realise that we have left him behind and really want to turn back towards him. Finding him will not be too difficult if we place the practice of prayer and daily scripture reading at the heart of our daily lives.

Brother Lawrence, who worked over 300 years ago in a French monastery discovered how to enjoy God moment by moment, even in the midst of busyness and distraction. It would be worth buying his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. In it he says the key to finding God in the ordinary is to continually lift our hearts to Him and maintain a running conversation with Him throughout the day. Why don't you consider trying that in this year ahead.

Are you really willing, will I be willing in this year ahead, to make a sacrifice, to rearrange our schedules, to sometimes miss out on the earthly business in order to go about our Father's business and ensure we do not lose Jesus in our pursuit for more? In everything you do this year, ask yourself the simple question – can I see Jesus in this activity, where is Christ in all of this? Let's be proactive in having him near us in everything we do.