**1 Samuel 2: 18-20, 26**

 Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, ‘May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord’; and then they would return to their home.

 Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.

**Colossians 3: 12-17**

 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**Luke 2: 41-end**

 Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, ‘Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.’ He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Parenting has always been difficult – I know I worked harder, and longer hours, and for much less pay when I was a stay at home parent than I ever did either before or since. Parenting is the hardest job I know – impossible to do perfectly, and just really hard to do well enough…..which is what we should aspire to, since perfection is not an option.

And parents and children sometimes have widely differing viewpoints, which means that parents have all sorts of decisions to make regarding when to let go and how much to let go. I have often said what a joy it was to have our boys grow up in North Cornwall: the physical freedom they could be allowed was huge compared with their south London cousins.

And then, in the odd idle moment over Christmas I have been reading a police procedural book in which a teenage girl is murdered and it emerges that her mother didn’t know she had a tattoo, though her stepfather did – which is potentially significant. I don’t know how it ends yet….

Later this week, I will conduct the funeral of a father of teenagers. Life is so precious and can’t be taken for granted. Parenting is difficult enough when there are two parents to share the roles and responsibilities. But when there aren’t, for whatever reason, the mountains that have to be climbed are even more challenging. Parents, whatever your circumstances, remember all the above, and cut yourself some slack when it all seems a bit hard.

And so here today we find Jesus – even Jesus - playing fast and loose with his parents’ emotions. It is interesting that thisis the only story of Jesus’ childhood that the early church preserved. We know that other apocryphal gospels tell stories of the boy Jesus turning clay pots into live pigeons and cursing a child who bullied him, only to bring him back to life again. But these stories just seem fantastical. It’s more persuasive (to me at least) that Jesus’ childhood was so **un**remarkable that no tales of this growing up period of Jesus’ life, other than this one told by Luke, survived.

So even Jesus’ earthly parents found bringing up a child stressful. This is a story with insight, and we mustn’t try to gloss over it: Jesus, quite clearly, should not have stayed back in Jerusalem without the knowledge and agreement of his parents.  Let us not let him off the hook. He frightened both parents when he went missing, and their natural response was to be cross with him for putting them through that worry.

But Jesus was human (albeit divine too), and just as we sometimes task ourselves with being perfect parents, so we tend to need Jesus to be perfect - and this is one rare instance where he really was just being a child, putting his own need to do and be who he was above any thoughts of his parents’ feelings. So perfection then is not a thing we should demand either of ourselves as parents, or of our children.

Setting aside this example of thoughtlessness though, what else can we see in today’s readings?

Christmas has come, and in the minds of many, it is already time to move on to the next thing. Time to clear out the Christmas merchandise from the shops, take back the stuff that doesn’t fit or doesn’t suit, get ready for New Year and then start looking beyond to, I don’t know, Easter maybe?

However, for the Church, Christmas is emphatically NOT over. The Christmas story is still with us, and next week, when we reach Epiphany, we will hear about the arrival of the Magi who came to visit Jesus.

But this week jumps into Jesus’ childhood, when he was probably about Bar Mitzvah age. So he has slipped away from his parents, temporarily mislaid, they assumed, in the hordes of people travelling back from Jerusalem, and we find him back in the Temple engaging in theological discussion with priests and others. He made an error – perhaps – of judgement, not uncommon among children his age. And the gospel passage ends with the words: And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour. We all have to learn and grow over time.

You might have noticed that the Old Testament passage from the first book of Samuel has an obvious parallel with the Jesus story. It too ends with similar words: Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.

Samuel was a similar age at the time – twelve-ish. He is ministering in the Temple in Shiloh, as an apprentice to Eli the priest, whose own sons were a bit wild and not terribly suitable to follow their father into the priesthood. Back at the beginning of the Samuel story, his mother Hannah pleaded with God to take away the shame of her childlessness, and promised that if God gave her a son, she would give him back to God by giving him to the Temple to serve God all his life. Which duly happened. And we are told that Hannah and her husband Elkanah made an annual pilgrimage to Shiloh to make sacrifices in thanksgiving for the gift of Samuel, and each time they come, they bring Samuel new clothes – he is a growing boy after all. And each time, Eli blesses them and asks God to grant them other children – which is due course they had.

The stories of Samuel and Jesus intersect in the Temples, where they both demonstrate their faithfulness to God, and a wisdom greater than their years. Samuel had actual responsibilities, assisting Eli with the sacrifices and so on. Jesus didn’t. He wasn’t an apprentice priest. But he engaged in theological conversation with religious teachers, and amazed those teachers with his understanding. And Jesus also confounds his parents as they realise they have to learn to deal with his growing understanding of himself and his vocation. Mary, being a mother, pondered these things in her heart – as she did at other key points in her life’s story.

(*quote*) Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

We can wonder whether the precocious child Jesus, causing the teachers in the Temple to gawp while he was (in inverted commas) ‘lost’ there for three days, knew that his destiny was somehow tied up in that place—that if we fast forward to the last days of his life, having caused another stir in the Temple by driving out the money lenders and others who misused it, **everything** would change. Just maybe, Luke’s account of the young Jesus is a sort of rehearsal of, or pointer to, the Easter story. It’s Christmas still.  But the cross is already coming into view. **Amen**