

Benefice Service

Sunday 30 December 2018. 10am Duddington.

'After 3 days they found him in the temple' Luke 2.46.

Travel Chaos.

Travel chaos is becoming normal at this time of year, especially over a holiday period. We can all feel sympathy for the crowds stuck at Gatwick Airport during the Drone Fiasco – unless you were one of the travellers and then I guess you would still be fuming. Holiday arrangements and family life would be thrown into confusion.

In our gospel glimpse of the early life of Jesus we find panic when his parents discover that Jesus is not in the caravansary as it heads back towards Nazareth after the Passover festivities. They retrace their steps and find him in the temple exploring adult conversations with the clergy. They were 'anxious' but there seems to be no need to call ChildLine or the police. The parents seemed to have a relaxed attitude to their son, leaving him to go off and play with others yet keeping track at a distance.

There were many families in the caravansary and the parents could not have known them all. There are a number of families represented here today at this Benefice Service but we may not know them all. What we do have in common is our pilgrimage together, exploring the glory of God, sharing food for the journey and no doubt the generous refreshments of our Duddington hosts.

Discovery.

It was out of this confusion of people that Jesus discovers himself. He wasn't lost; he found himself in the temple doing something which appealed to him, though his parents found confusing. Isn't this just how careers begin, how vocations are born? The young Jesus was drawn to religion but it wasn't a local rabbi in the making but the Lord of all the World.

At the age of 3 Coleridge could read a chapter of the bible; at 7 Beethoven gave his first public performance; at 8 Churchill marshalled armies of lead soldiers and at an early age the future Cardinal Basil Hume would celebrate mass with his sisters, all in their dressing-gowns. Vocations are often discovered at an early age.

Jesus' presence in the temple at Jerusalem was not mandatory. He was 12, one year below the statutory age for public attendance. Yet his parents were conscientious. They put him in the way of godly influences because that was their own custom. They would have no idea what might emerge from that experience.

Vocation.

So our picture of Jesus' early family life – lost among friends and familiar circumstances – threw up the most important vocation there has ever been. That was 2000 years ago and we are still celebrating the fact. Today however, our Benefice meets but what will it throw up? Will a vocation be fired or

encouraged among us today? And what would that vocation lead to? An architect maybe, or an orator or musician?

Who will serve this Benefice in 30 years time? Who will be the wardens, The Treasurer, the Priest-in-Charge or The Reader? At the centre of our church there is much hand-wringing going on about its future. Archbishop Justin and his team are encouraging every priest to have a conversation a day about Christian vocation – about how we all might serve the church and Our Lord in the future. I have spotted a few obvious vocations to Reader ministry, to Wardening and perhaps one to ordained ministry within the Benefice but none of them are 12 years old or even very young. Furthermore, I have said nothing to any of them which is irresponsible, I know. But a word such as that would seem out of place in our current vocabulary. We do not have among us a culture of expectation that God will act, call or create those coincidences which make us wonder. (Some of you may have seen 'Call the Midwife' on Christmas Day. In the episode there was a fascinating conversation about vocation initiated by the soon-to-be-elected Reverend Mother. It's worth getting it back on iPlayer).

However, we already have a vocation. Each of us are 'God-bearers' (in the words of Desmond Tutu) from our baptism. How do we encourage that growth into a mature responsibility? Surely we are not all destined to sit in the pew for the rest of our lives! In the case of Ordained Ministry, if this Benefice doesn't start producing vocations then on whom will we depend for future clergy? If parishes actually want clergy in the future then they must start to grow them now! And it is not just the responsibility of Almighty God to call. The Church – you and I – must question, call, provoke and challenge ourselves and those around us.

Where do clergy come from? They come from parishes like these and there is enough love, generosity, sacrificial living, humour, encouragement and brain power to produce a bench of bishops between us!

As Joseph and Mary allowed Jesus to run up against wonder, so let us follow their example and put it up among our New Year Resolutions to have that kind of conversation among us. Amen.