

Lent Compline Talks 2015

22 February Prof John Morris

Conflicts with family

Jesus cannot have had an easy childhood. Imagine what it must have been like for him growing up.

Of course we know very little about his birth and childhood and much that is in the gospels cannot be true in an historical sense. Mark – supposedly the earliest – and John make no reference to Jesus birth. Jesus first appears from Nazareth to be baptised by John. Matthew & Luke have the most. Matthew gives a table of descent through Joseph (not Mary), Mary's betrothal, early pregnancy, the annunciation by an angel, the wise men, the flight to Egypt and finally return to Nazareth. Luke has even more embellishment of the Matthew story, Mary and Joseph are named, they travel to Bethlehem for Augustus' registration again because of Joseph's Davidic lineage, we have the shepherds but not wise men, Simeon and Anna, no flight to Egypt, but simply a return to Nazareth "when they had done everything prescribed by the law of the Lord" Then simply "the child grew big and strong and full of wisdom, and God's favour was upon him." Of the other non-canonical gospels, a remaining fragment of the gospel of the Nazarenes describes the clothes of the Magi; the Gospel of the Ebionites starts at the baptism by John, the gospel of Thomas and of the Hebrews make no reference.

If only a tiny part of that was historic it cannot have been an easy childhood. In those days early unplanned pregnancy would have been a social disgrace and one cannot imagine that in such a rural community it would not have been noticed. What DID the neighbours say? And Joseph – apparently a carpenter – if he was originally minded to "put Mary away privily" he must have wondered about the baby's paternity; and if an angel did speak to him – what was a simple carpenter to think? – the people of Galilee were thought of as very simple country folk. How often must he have looked at the growing Jesus and wondered? Could the infant Christ never have been naughty? How might Joseph have reacted? We shall never know.

Nazareth in the first century was a Jewish settlement (pop 50-2000) in southern Galilee remote from main routes; apparently very poor with most people living in caves in the limestone, some with a roofed structure at the front. But, it was only 6 kilometers from the flourishing city of Sepphoris, built by Herod as a new capital – so Jesus grew up in the sphere of influence of a cultured Hellenistic city. As a carpenter he and Joseph may even have been recruited to the building of Sepphoris. His parables suggest he knows about banking and creditors, but Jesus appears to have been silent about Sepphoris – in his ministry he talked to country people largely centred around the lakeside town of Capernaum where there was a synagogue and Peter's house.

What we have next from Luke is the story of the family annual visit to Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus was twelve. The festival is over, the family or village party group leave for Nazareth (about 65 miles), but at the end of the day finding him missing have to trek back to Jerusalem. Can you imagine what Joseph and Mary were saying? Even more so that they apparently had to search for him for 3 days before they found him sitting in the temple listening to and questioning the teachers. "And all who heard him were amazed at his intelligence and the answers he gave" His mother is the one who speaks (which makes Joseph as household head's silence even more indicative of his frame of mind) – "My son, why have you treated us like this, your father and I ..." and the answer "Did you not know I was bound to be in my Father's house?" but then he went back with them and continued to be under their authority. As Jesus grew he advanced in wisdom and in favour with God and men.

The next we hear of Jesus relations with his family comes in John with the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee where Jesus and his disciples were guests. The wine runs out and Mary says to Jesus "They have no wine left" – Jesus' reply (at least in the NEB translation) is not even particularly polite "Your concern, mother, not mine! –my hour has not yet come" – but then perhaps a softening or a resolution of the conflict for his mother's sake, the jars are filled with gallons of water and the guests all declare it "the best wine till now"

Jesus mother clearly stays with him as part of the group of women who attend on the disciples – and Jesus brothers are also part of the group that goes to Capernaum – but they did not stay there long. We have a brief reference to Jesus larger family in both Mark and Luke when Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth, read the lesson from Isaiah “the spirit of the Lord is upon me ...” and began to teach with great authority. But in Mark the crowd say “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joseph Judas and Simon, and aren’t his sisters here with us” so they fell foul of him, but in Luke “There was a general stir of admiration, but they still ask “Is this not Joseph’s son? And when Jesus continues they throw him out of town.

Jesus repeatedly upholds the law of Moses in terms of ‘honour your father and your mother’ but at at least one point we get a rather equivocal view. Matthew 12 and Mark 3 both tell us of an occasion when Jesus was teaching, to a crowd, his mother and brothers turn up and wait outside asking to speak to him. But Jesus says “Who is my mother, who are my brothers? Then he points to his disciples and says “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly father is my brother, my sister, my mother”. What must Mary and the brothers have felt when they heard that??

How does all this possible but very sketchy conflict in the family end?

At the foot of the cross all the gospels place Mary of Magdala, the first three gospels have Mary the mother of James (the younger and Joseph ? and Jesus) and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (and a Salome); Luke just has “the women who had accompanied him from Galilee – no mention of the brothers here – we have no idea what happened to Joseph. Only John is explicit that Jesus mother was there with her sister Mary and the disciple whom he loved; we have the lovely story “Mother there is your son”. So at least the key duo – mother and son – may have been present at the time of Jesus’ death.

After the crucifixion it is Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James who come on Sunday to anoint the body; the disciples are mostly in hiding – shocked and unbelieving at what has happened and fearful for their own safety no doubt. No record of his mother or brothers.

But then, and perhaps this is the true resolution to the family conflict if such there ever was. At the very start of Acts, after the ascension, we read “Then they returned to Jerusalem from Olivet (no further than a Sabbath day’s journey). Entering the city they went to the room upstairs where they were lodging: Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip & Thomas, Bartholomew & Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James. All were constantly at prayer together, and with them a group of women, *including Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers.*” So much of the family *were* together and united. And of course Jesus brother James becomes the leader of the Jerusalem church and, like Jesus, devoted to continuing his mission to the Jews. For this resolution of conflict we give thanks.