



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

First Sunday of Christmas

Readings: [Luke 2:4-50](#),

29 December 2024

I went through many emotions when a calendar invite to the 'Christmas Washup' meeting dropped into my inbox. At first, I was confused as I wondered whether the Dean was inviting me to wash his Christmas dishes with him. Still, I reasoned and became less confused and more excited as I realised, I was being invited to reflect with other colleagues on how our Christmas services and events have gone.

So, presuming that the Dean hasn't invited hundreds of you to the Christmas Washup meeting, I thought I would share a sneak peek of my headline reflections with you to think about this morning's scriptures.

There is much to say by way of thank you, but I fear liturgical purists in the Cathedral community would take me to task if I used the sermon slot to do that. I want to reflect on the growth in attendance across almost all of our services. I remember becoming concerned as people piled into the second of the outstanding Carol Services. By this point, every seat throughout the Cathedral had seemingly been taken, and I somewhat naively asked one of the Cathedral Wardens when we closed the doors and began to turn people away. With the calmness and serenity of a seasoned Warden come, Steward, Monica informed me, "We don't, dear!" and continued to calmly magic space for more and more people.

The serious reflection, beyond a bit of holiday wit, is that people in their droves sought out a communal celebration of the birth of Jesus in a way we haven't witnessed since before COVID. That is significant because I think in an age characterised by rampant individualism, the numbers who came to share in our Christmas services tell us of a desire for meaning and a desire to discover that meaning in the context of Christian community and in that I take hope and encouragement. And I was watching the numbers carefully, not so we could rejoice in statistics but draw encouragement and fresh hope from the work of God in our midst. As archdeacon, throughout the autumn, I heard hopeful stories from local clergy of fresh spiritual hunger manifesting in unchurched people turning up, seemingly randomly at services across the archdeaconry. Stories of young people appearing in traditional services, asking about the bible, and seeking confirmation.

Every year, this period between Christmas Day and the New Year is a season of confusion for me. Not because I don't know why we're celebrating it, or because I don't understand why we're eating so much food and seeing so many family and friends. It isn't very clear because this period between Christmas and New Year is profoundly disorientating. I suspect I am not alone when I say that I completely lost the pattern of the day and week over this period. When I walked out of the Cathedral after the Eucharist on Christmas Day, I knew I was preaching on the first Sunday of Christmas (today). Still, psychologically, I was telling myself, '*Matthew, you've got a whole week until you're preaching*', and yet the reality was I had a few days. This is a profoundly disorientating season.

And I wonder if, to varying degrees of consciousness, those people who have been turning up in churches and coming to this place at Christmas, when that hasn't been their practice hitherto, are

also in a season of disorientation. This disorientation is perhaps uncomfortable or confusing, but it needn't be troubling as there's a good biblical precedent for being disorientated. The theologian Walter Bruggeman suggests that life has a rhythm of moving between orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Bruggeman identified this rhythm most profoundly in the Book of Psalms, but we find something of that pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation in today's passage from Luke 2.

We don't get much insight into the formational years of Jesus' life between the infancy narratives and his baptism. Today's passage from Luke 2 helps us see the deeply human interaction between Jesus, Mary and Joseph, having the kind of conversation that all parents here probably recognise and recollect having with kids. Our passage shows parents, Mary and Joseph, travelling back from the Passover festival in Jerusalem, and after travelling for a day, they realise that Jesus is no longer with them. It takes a further three days before they are reunited with Jesus in the Temple – there's the orientation and disorientation for you: every parent's worst nightmare, for their child to go missing. In verse 48, Jesus is asked a question from Mary that all parents will recognise. In Luke's Gospel, it is expressed rather eloquently, but in modern parenting vernacular, I would summarise it as 'Where have you been?!'.

In his reply to his parent's consternation in verse 49, Jesus questions why they were anxious and searching for him and didn't simply have confidence about where he would be found. Mary and Joseph are perplexed at these words and I don't think their lack of understanding in verse 50 is down to the emotion of Jesus being seemingly lost.

At risk of some of you branding me a heretic, I am going to suggest that Jesus is confusing and confuses people. For those, including myself, who have a bias towards clarity, this can be deeply unsettling, but that Jesus is confusing and confuses us is part of the journey of faith and trust rather than clarity and knowledge of God. If we contrast the shape of this passage from Luke 2 with some of the parables in John, where a story is told and then an explanation is given, Luke 2 sees no explanation as to why Mary and Joseph would have known that Jesus would be in his Father's house.

Do you see it now this pattern that Bruggeman talks about of moving between orientation, disorientation, and reorientation? So, what does this mean for us as we stand on the brink of entering 2025? People in society have become deeply suspicious, even cynical, of big, bold and seemingly simple claims. The penny has dropped that life is complicated, and to make any sense of it, we have to live with rather than fight against that complexity. Jesus invites us to live with confusion so long as we're also willing to live with him in faith and trust

For the Church, then, the next year presents a wonderful opportunity to offer people hope amidst complexity and confusion. In verse 51 of Luke 2, we read '*Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them*'. Jesus walks with us and those we seek to serve in our confusion. Let me finish with Pope Francis, who has declared 2025 to be a Jubilee Year entitled Pilgrims of Hope. Francis writes:

*"By our actions, our words, the decisions we make each day, our patient efforts to sow seeds of beauty and kindness wherever we find ourselves, we want to sing of hope... and reawaken in every heart the joy and courage to embrace life to the full."*¹

Amen.

The Venerable Matthew Trick, Residentiary Canon