Luke 3.15-22 SAW 12.012019

Reactions to Jesus

My childhood was a long time ago. I grew up in the North West of England, within sight of the City of Manchester. My parents came from large families and many of them lived within a short walk and a simple bus ride of us. Each of them was married and had children- my cousins. When I talked about my cousins to people outside my family, I would talk about our David or our Sylvia. I don`t know if anyone else talks like that but we did. When I was little, they were simply there. You belonged together. Sometimes you went to school together or played football together or just went to visit. Most of the time cousins were a good thing to have.

The gospel reading this morning is about two cousins.: John and Jesus. We don`t know much about their childhood. But we do know that their mothers Mary and Elizabeth were related . (Luke 1:36) Luke goes to great trouble to show the closeness of this relationship, so we can assume that they were cousins. Although they lived a distance away from each other, the clear strength of their mother’s relationship means that they would have got to know each other. Well how? Luke again is the only person, to tell us about something of the family life of Jesus. In Chapter 2 v 41, he tells us that every year Jesus `parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. This was an ideal opportunity for the two branches of the family to meet up and spend time together. So if they spoke like me, they would have said about each other, “Our John and our Jesus”.

Let`s just focus for a few minutes on one incident where that John would probably have heard of. Jesus was on one of his visits with his parents to Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph start walking home and at the end of the day, Jesus is missing. Why didn`t they notice anything earlier ? Because they thought he was with someone else. I think he went off with John. How else would he have got something to eat and somewhere to sleep, if it wasn`t his cousin whose dad was a priest who sometimes went to work in the Temple.

Now I haven`t got a single piece of evidence for this idea, I have never read anything about the relationship between the two. I am trying to understand why John should say about Jesus, in response to a question, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the throng of his sandals. he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” He could only have said this if he knew Jesus and only if he knew him to a remarkable degree. I have two reasons for saying this.

First the comparison between himself and Jesus. He says that he is not worthy to untie the throng of his sandals. Now what is this sandal stuff about? Palestinian teachers were not paid, but pupils used to show their appreciation by a variety of services. A rabbinic saying runs “ Every service which a slaver performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher, except the loosing of his sandal throngs. Taking off shoes is just not on the list of things to do. It is just too grovelling. But John says he is not worthy to take off his cousin’s sandals. Now, when I was little, I knew that most of my cousins who were older than me were in a different league to me. Our Sylvia had a great voice, our Brian could build a wall in a morning, our David got into Oxford, but they were my cousins. They were good, but I would never think of them as that different. So why does John say this? Jesus has not begun his ministry. At this point in time, he is just a village carpenter. He has not done any miracles, told any stories. All he has done is make some fence posts, the odd table, and mended a few wooden carts. So what could have happened to make John stand in awe of his younger cousin. I needed to be something very special. Was it the time when Jesus was 12 and John who lived near Jerusalem gave him a guided tour. Did he take him to some rabbis he knew in the temple court?

Did he introduce his little cousin and then was he amazed as this boy could talk on the same level as these scholars. Now almost twenty years later he had come to the conclusion, before anyone else, that our Jesus was our Messiah.

Now almost 20 years later John is attracting large crowds. He is preaching on the east side of the river Jordan, at least a day or twos walk from Jerusalem. His sermons are clear and direct. They point out the moral degradation of the nation from top to bottom. Such behaviour will result yet again in God`s judgement on his people. John repeatedly reminds his hearers that repentance is necessary if this fate is to be averted. Repentance is theoretically very simple. It is first a recognition of the things that are wrong in our lives and secondly to ask for God`s help in remaking the way we live. As a sign of this change, John invites people to be baptized as a sign of the cleansing they need.

Then one day, Jesus comes and seeks to identify with the people. He comes to be baptized by John. The thinkers in the church have always found this a bit of a problem. Why would Jesus need a baptism of repentance, wasn`t he without sin? “ In the early church, it was sometimes suggested, with a homely touch that he did it to please Mary, his mother, and in answer to her entreaties; but we would need a better reason than that…….It was not that he was conscious of sin and of the need for repentance. It was that he knew that now He too must identify with the people in their desire to know God. For Jesus the emergence of John was God`s call to action; and hi first call to action was to identify Himself with the people in their search for God.”(William Barclay- The Gospel of Luke p 33)

But in Jesus` baptism something happened. Before he could take this tremendous step, he had to be sure that he was right: and in the moment of the baptism God spoke to him. The voice of God came to him and told him he had made the right decision. But more- far more- that very same voice of God mapped out the whole course of his life. God said to him, You are my son, the Beloved , with you I am well pleased.” As you might imagine scholars have written a great deal on the meaning of these words. Most scholars are agreed that You are my son- my beloved is from Isaiah ch 44v 2. This text stresses the unique relationship between Jesus as the only son and God as his Father (I.Howard Marshall Luke p 156) The description beloved is found in many places in the OT, but again most scholars think it is Is 42 v 1. And is from a description of the servant of the Lord whose suffering culminates in Isaiah ch 53. Now you may be thinking, all this stuff about theologians is dead boring and nothing to do with Jesus. But, it was Jesus in his very first public address in his local synagogue who chose this text to describe his future. So the baptism of Jesus shows him asking for God`s approval and receiving the destiny of the cross.

At the beginning of this sermon, I talked about my cousins, our Sylvia, our Brian and our David. But my brothers, were our John and our Robert. Our John lives in Spain, but our Robert still lives near Manchester. So this local Mancunian way of talking allows me to talk about our Jesus. It is not my Jesus, but our Jesus, because we are his family. Now I did nothing to become a Robinson or a MacGregor, I was simply born that way. The wonderful thing is that by fulfilling his destiny Jesus allows us to be part of his family and to pray our Father who is in heaven.

And just as our Father gave Jesus an affirmation and a destiny, so each of us shares in the acceptance and encouragement that Jesus received . God delights in us, even when we are not pleased with ourselves. And he thinks we are so important that he gives us a unique character and unique gifts and a unique destiny. Like Jesus our destiny is to serve. That is not always easy and it can be incredibly demanding, but it is the way to find love and joy and peace. So let us not moan, or meckern, let us rejoice in this day with its unique opportunities to meet with Jesus and our brothers and sisters and to serve our Jesus.