Christmas is a time for families. All of us have been a part of a family, at some stage of our life - even if it was not the one we were born into. Many of us are still part of one now. Of all the times of the year, this is probably the point where we are especially aware what that it means to us to be with or without a family to share seasonal celebrations.

I wonder what your experience of family has been over the past week? Are you, perhaps, someone who wishes that they had a family ... maybe your Christmas day was spent in your own company. That may have been a good, or a less good thing. Your mind and heart may have been full of those you have lost, or an awareness of others who were not on their own. Others may have been longing for escape from the busyness or stress of a crowded house, or on the other hand relishing the love and sense of belonging that can come with a series of generations gathered in one place for familiar rituals. Others may recognize that for them, family is not brothers and sisters, parents or children – but is some other community. Perhaps even a Cathedral.

It’s comforting to know that Jesus had his own experience of family. Once the extraordinary events surrounding his birth had been left behind, there was just the ordinary business of growing up in a religiously devout Jewish tradesman’s house, observing the annual ritual of pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Passover for all who were of age. It is, above all, ordinary. The extended family went - a huge gathering from the town, making their way south from Nazareth to the temple city. And then back north again, enjoying one another’s company, talking about what they had picked up in the market, or heard in the religious debates, or experienced at the hands of the Romans still occupying the country. How much they hated those Romans!

And then, as they were pausing for the night’s rest at the end of the first day of the journey home, the awful realisation in Mary and Joseph that their boy was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he was often off on his own, exploring, learning, discovering - we don’t know, but we can imagine, just for a moment, what Jesus must have been like growing up. Exasperating and wonderful in equal measure, we might think. We’ve got to go back! They said ... and hurried in the evening light back to the great city, looking frantically.

What was Jesus thinking? And what is this story doing here in the scriptures? Why did Luke choose to incorporate it amongst his carefully chosen fragments of Jesus’ life and teaching?

*Luke’s gospel seems to emphasise the impact of Jesus on the lives of real, human people in their real, human needs* - he records for us Jesus’ teaching about God’s priorities for the poor, the sick, the outcast. For women, and those excluded from the higher ranks of religious and social life. For Luke, Jesus is someone who profoundly understands and feels for our human condition. He is the one who has recorded the extraordinary truth of the Son of God placed in a manger - as some children sang in one of our carol services, in words I’d not heard before, Hee haw hee haw, the Donkey’s song ... “doesn’t anybody care; there’s a baby in my dinner and it’s not fair!”

So here is Jesus at 12 years old in a very human situation, but one in which he is already revealing the priorities in his life - priorities which were always going to have to hold the tension between attentiveness to God, and commitment and care for those around him. I love the final line, “and he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.” Here we see Jesus learning who he is, what was expected of him – and *growing in wisdom!* And for the second time, Mary treasures what has happened in her heart, just as she did after the departure of the shepherds.
Looking back over your Christmases, what do you have to treasure in your heart? We don’t often take the time, some of us at least, to pause and ponder, as Mary did. I’m fortunate, as many of you know, to have 3 months for exactly that, starting the day after tomorrow! A sabbatical is a time for professional and personal refreshment, an opportunity for re-calibration, checking the map for the route that has led you thus far, and for what lies ahead. For me, it is going to include the chance to reflect on six years here as Dean - on what brought me here, especially an excitement in the work of reconciliation. In what has sustained and refreshed me here, especially wonderful colleagues both within the Cathedral and the wider city and Diocese, and our shared work in the arts alongside our growing mission to increased numbers of visitors and guests at special events. And, of course, in what comes next - looking both towards and beyond the opportunities offered by the City of Culture celebrations in 2021. I’m going to be doing that in the context of a college in Auckland, in New Zealand, and then later in East Africa, visiting partners in reconciliation in Burundi and Rwanda and then climbing Kilimanjaro.

I realise it’s a considerable privilege to take that amount of time out - and few have the opportunity to take quite so much time for it. It occurred to me as I was reflecting on the readings for today that it was what Jesus was doing when he dipped out of the family’s journey to hang around in the temple and talk about God. But all of us need to do it, from time to time: all of us need to take that time to touch the heart of our lives, to count what’s important, and see what needs nourishing. It feeds vision for the next stage. [cf retreat in daily life]

The cost and the benefit of this activity is not just for the individual. Jesus’ family bore the brunt of the time he spent in the temple. My colleagues will have both opportunities and challenges of being one person down for three months - please do give them your support during this time. They are at least looking forward to being freed from the Dean’s bright ideas for a little while - and do not want me sharing them from the other side of the world! But the benefits should also be for the wider family, and to just the person who is stepping aside for a while. The prayer would ask you to offer for me whilst I am away is that would equip me to be more the person God needs me to be, as well as to do the things God needs me to do, for this to be the Cathedral God wants us to be in the future.

And that vision, of course, will involve all of us. The Epistle today, from Colossians chapter 3, is a vision of a reconciled and reconciling humanity. It includes the concluding line from the Coventry Litany, which we translate as, ‘Be kind to one another, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you’. If there is a prayer of my heart for you as I prepare to go away, it has to be this: that together we will be a family, a family which knows we get things wrong but is ready to ‘Bear with’ - knowing that like it or not we have all been chosen to belong to one another and to God. Yesterday some of us were here watching archive TV footage of the Cathedral, of Duke Ellington’s performance, but also interviews with Bill Williams speaking about the ‘new community’ which he was hoping to build. One founded on reconciliation.

The priority for 2019 is that in this Cathedral we live up to our calling to be a people of Reconciliation, and see that expressed not just through the reconciliation ministry, but through the worship, the welcome, our inward life as well as our mission. The departure of our Canon for Reconciliation means that we all have to pick up the baton. We will have the services, for a day a week, of Mark Simmons as ‘Dean’s Advisor for Reconciliation Ministry’, but the task will belong to all of us, as we step up to the challenge of embodying reconciliation values in all that we do. The passage from Colossians is a good guide to what that looks like.

Today we leave Jesus for almost 20 years, growing up, learning a trade, learning who he is and what he’s for, until we rejoin him as he begins his public ministry by the lake in Galilee. What happened in those years to help him become the man who had come to understand that he was the Messiah, the Son of God? Nothing fancy, nothing, flash - but a quiet devotion to God, whom he worshipped, and obedience to his family, with whom God had placed him, led him to the place where he fulfilled all that God asked of him.

What’s your journey? What’s the journey of your life? What is there still for you to do? May God give us all insight and obedience for the year to come.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.