

Holy Family: Jesus, Mary and Joseph, 13th January 2019

I must admit that when I read the Alleluia verse for today's Mass, it somewhat tickled me: "Thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel, the Saviour (*Vere tu es Deus absconditus, Deus Israel, salvator*)" (Is 45:15). The Alleluia of course leads into the Gospel: and what was today's Gospel all about (if you needed any reminding)? – The Child Jesus being found in the Temple – proving, it would seem in the process, to be something of "a hidden God"! Last Sunday, however, we celebrated the great solemnity of the Epiphany, the 'manifestation', of the Christ Child to the wise men: a revealing, therefore, rather than a hiding away.

How then can God be said be "a hidden God (*Deus absconditus*)" and yet, as we will hear later on at Mass in the words of the Preface for the Epiphany, his "only-begotten Son appeared (*apparuit*) in the substance of our mortal nature"? The truth is that the more God reveals of himself, the more we realise how much of the mystery still remains hidden from us. In fact, it is only through revelation, through those inspired words of the prophet Isaiah in the Alleluia verse, for example, that we know that he is "a hidden God"; and, indeed, how would we know that there was a "God" at all, if it had not been revealed to us in some way?

Having verse fifteen of chapter forty-five of Isaiah just before the Gospel tickled me because of its emphasising this hiddenness of God specifically within the context of the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. Yes, God was hidden as well as revealed in Christ, but was Jesus really hiding in the Temple? No, certainly not! He was not playing some kind of game of hide-and-seek with "his parents" (Lk 2:43), Our Lady and St Joseph. Yes, I know that they did plenty of seeking, and yet he himself had not done any hiding: he was simply there in the Temple in Jerusalem, about his "Father's business" (Lk 2:49), for anyone to find him.

God does not play games with us: he wants us, in all seriousness, to find him. He, for his part, comes to us; comes to us in the Incarnation of his only-begotten Son, and yet we ourselves have to go and find him; have to go out and search for him. Whether manifesting himself last week in Bethlehem or seeming to hide himself today in Jerusalem, the wise men and then his parents have to journey in search of him; though, unlike the wise men, Our Lady and St Joseph have no star to guide them! Their journey may have been less as long, though it was certainly no less intense.

When St Luke, in the Gospel, tells us that his parents: "sought him among his kinsfolks and acquaintance. And not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him" (Lk 2:44-45), he uses a word for "sought" and "seeking" which signifies an intense searching; literally, a searching 'up-and-down'. In the Gospel from the Jerusalem Bible, which I read at Mass in a Hereford parish two weeks ago for the same feast of the Holy Family, this 'up-and-down' searching was described in terms of Our Lady and St Joseph "looking for him everywhere" (Lk 2:45). This might, however, give the impression (as it has indeed done for me) that they literally went to every possible location in Jerusalem, and yet this is not precisely what is implied by their intense "seeking".

Jesus' mother and foster-father would have known that there were certain places in Jerusalem where they would be likely to find him and others that were less likely or completely unlikely. One of the obvious likely places, and it was where they finally found him, was of course the Temple. And, perhaps like me, you have sometimes asked yourself the question: Why, honestly, couldn't they find him quicker than "three days" (Lk 2:46)? Well, leaving aside the symbolic importance of "three days", which the Latin clearly accentuates with its mention of "*triduum*", we have to carefully consider here the exact circumstances in which the Christ Child was found: "they found him in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions" (Lk 2:46).



In the Chapter room at Belmont Abbey (which although not a proper ‘Chapter house’ as such is still a special room), there is an icon of Christ “sitting in the midst of the doctors”. The icon was written by our Fr Dyfrig, who sadly passed away seven years ago, and depicts a rather large figure of the twelve-year-old Jesus; larger in fact than those of the doctors surrounding him. Obviously, this enlargement duly focuses our attention and devotion upon the figure of Christ, yet it is of course completely out of proportion. If he had been the same size as in the icon, Our Lady and St Joseph would certainly have had no problems in finding him! The fact was that a still fairly small boy, seated and surrounded by the learned old men of the Law, would hardly be easy to find, even in the Temple. We should therefore marvel not at the fact that they only found him “after three days” (Lk 2:46), but rather at the fact that they ever found him at all!

Christ, in the same Gospel of St Luke, would later promise his disciples: “seek, and you shall find” (Lk 11:9). And that was just for straightforward seeking, not necessarily that intense “seeking” with which his parents (Lk 2:45), years before, had searched for him: no wonder then that they did indeed find him in the end, despite all the difficulties involved. St Benedict, in his Rule, says that concern should be taken to see “whether the novice truly seeks God” (RB 58); and surely this applies not only to novices: the whole monastic life, indeed Christian life, is all about seeking God (and perhaps even with a bit of intensity!).

God will of course remain something of “a hidden God (*Deus absconditus*)” (Is 45:15) for us; when we think that we have finally found him, then he will again seem to be “hidden”. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple did not signal the start of his public ministry as such, but rather what are known as his ‘hidden years’ – eighteen in total, longer therefore than the twelve years of his childhood and the three years of his ministry put together. God, as we have already mentioned, does want us, nevertheless, to find him; and yet, as could be seen in the case of the wise men and of Our Lady and St Joseph, trying to find him can sometimes be something of a challenge (and so it should be). All he asks of us, though, as he does of all his disciples, is simply: “seek [...]” (Lk 11:9).