

“having the mind of Christ,” recognised certain writings as giving a true portraiture of Christ. The process of authorisation of books was similar to the recognition of true prophets in the primitive Church assemblies; the prophet spoke, but “the others”—the silent multitude—“discerned,” and the sentence of their discernment, or discrimination, was final; so it was with the Gospels. In any case, however men may choose to account for it, the Gospels have a “natural force,” which shows no sign of abatement. They will outlast both inconsiderate attacks and unwise defences, and they will continue to affect men in the future as they have in the past; because the Christ in the hearts of each generation is mirrored in them; because the Church of each age will always hear in them a voice that she feels to be divine.

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THE STORY OF THE LOST AND FOUND.

THERE can be, I suppose, very little doubt but that we owe to our Lord’s mother those stories of His infancy and childhood which are among the most precious things in the Gospel of St. Luke. The Evangelist nowhere claims or suggests that any part of his narrative was revealed to him in any supernatural way. However much it may have been overruled for the purposes of what we call “Inspiration,” it is clear from his own statement that its compilation was (humanly speaking) due to his own profound interest in the Life of Christ, and his own careful inquiry concerning the details of that Life. This must have been pre-eminently the case with regard to those particular details which lay outside the Synoptic tradition. We have reason to believe that our Lord’s mother was still living (probably at Ephesus) whilst St. Luke was preparing the material

for his Gospel. The stories of the infancy could hardly have come from any other source. It seems indeed almost impossible to imagine that any other source existed. It would be the most natural thing in the world that so great a traveller as our Evangelist should seek out the mother of our Lord wherever she might be, in order to get from her own lips information of such inexpressible interest to himself as well as to others.

This will be generally conceded as in the highest degree probable with respect to all this section of the Third Gospel. But it applies with peculiar force to the story of how the Holy Child was lost and found again. It seems inconceivable that it was taken from a book. It stands absolutely alone. It is quite unlike any of the apocryphal stories of His childhood. More than this, the real interest of it—the abiding, spiritual interest of it—evidently appears, on reflection, to attach itself not to the Child but to His “parents.” In a word the story can only show itself in its true light and beauty when it is treated as the Virgin Mother’s story of how she and Joseph lost that Holy Child and how they found Him again. Of course St. Luke wrote it, or rewrote it, in his own words as an integral part of his narrative; that was the task which he had set himself, and in fulfilling it he had to get rid of the personal note—the note of a profound spiritual experience—which the story must have had as told to him. But if once we have the clue, if we believe on internal evidence that it *is* the Virgin Mother’s story, we can without any difficulty put it back into her own words, and recover the personal note which makes it so infinitely touching. It cannot be wrong to do so, nor can it be charged with folly, because it is simply following up the line pointed out for us by the strong probabilities of the case. The Evangelist, having set his heart upon the blessed task of tracing the course

of all things accurately from the first, has found out (whether first or last does not matter) the aged mother of our Lord in that seclusion into which St. John had taken her. He has heard from her lips those stories of the Nativity, and of what preceded it, which he alone was privileged to give to the world. And then, surely, he must have said to her, "But have you nothing to tell me about His boyhood and His early manhood whilst He lived beneath your roof?" And she, we feel sure, will have answered him in substance thus, "Nothing—nothing that is fitting to be given to the world as you propose to give it. All His life with us was so quiet, so self-restrained, so hidden. He did no mighty works, He wrote no books, He preached no sermons—He only lived the perfect life of duty, obedience, and contemplation, in a small and mean estate. It would be doing Him a wrong to break the silence of those years, devoted as they were by the eternal Wisdom to the training of His human spirit: it would seem like gratifying a natural but idle curiosity." "Howbeit," she must have added after a pause, "There *is* one thing which I may tell you because it really concerns ourselves much more than it concerns Him: the memory of it has burnt itself into my mind: I recollect it all as if it were yesterday, because it was grief and shame and terror to me, followed by thankfulness and wonder unspeakable. Only think, we lost Him once, actually *lost* that Divine Child that had been committed to our care and charge, lost Him outright for three days, and almost believed we had lost Him for ever. It cannot be wrong to tell you, and through you all the friends of Christ, how *we* lost the Saviour-Child, and how *we* found Him again." It is of course guess-work, more or less—this putting of the Bible story into the mouth of His mother. But it is (I venture to think) justified by three very powerful considerations. First, the story must

originally have come from her or from Joseph—and he must have died before the story would have had any interest for others. Second, the obvious and intelligible reserve of Scripture about our Lord's early life makes some explanation of this solitary exception necessary, and rules out as insufficient the commonplace explanations often given. Third, the incident itself, thus thrown up into conspicuous relief against a background of silence, proves to be quite disappointing when treated merely as an incident in *His* life. If any one doubts that statement, let him think of the pictures he has seen (Holman Hunt's or another's) of the sermons he has heard, of the commentaries he has read. The older sort we reject, because they place the Holy Child in a position in which we feel quite sure that He never would (at that age) have placed Himself. We are certain that He did not lay Himself out for notoriety or applause. We are equally certain that He did not wilfully stay behind in the Temple, because He found it more interesting to be there than in the company of His parents. The newer sort we accept with thankfulness as throwing some light on the religious education of Jewish boys—which He also shared. But when all is said that can be from this point of view, the results are very disappointing. There is not anything to learn—there is no lesson perceptible, although we feel certain there was one intended. In a word, we must read it as the Virgin Mother's story, if we want to get at the true inwardness of it: and this, thank God, is quite easy—because it *was* hers originally. She will have told it to St. Luke in some such words as these: "You must not suppose that He was lost to us through any wilfulness or disobedience on His part, or any indifference to our feelings: He was never like that. It was just through our own carelessness that we lost sight of Him. I shudder even now when I look back and realise the dreadfulness of

the risk we ran. We were incomparably the happiest and the richest people in the world, but all the riches we had and all the happiness we enjoyed were in Him who dwelt within our home and made it Heaven. And we, in our easy-going confidence, actually lost Him! I think sometimes what would have happened if we had been obliged to return at last to Nazareth without Him: how could we have answered for it to ourselves or to God! Other people lose their children by the will of God, and they find it bitter enough. (*He never could bear to see a mother's grief—you know about the widow of Nain and her son.*) But to have forfeited that heavenly Child whom God had entrusted to us—that would have been so supremely awful! How did it come about? Very simply and easily, after all. He had always been ours, and had never caused us any anxiety. We had got so accustomed to His always being there, we just took His presence for granted: it never occurred to us that He could be lost. So we set out on our return journey, with a crowd of other pilgrims from Galilee, many of them relatives, friends, or acquaintances of our own. There is always a lot of very pleasant intercourse, you know, on these return journeys when the observances of the Passover are over, and the mind is free for lighter things. Perhaps there is some reaction too. So we were busy, and happy, and preoccupied all day, and it never once occurred to us that we had not set eyes on Him since we left the Holy City. He was in fact lost, and we had never noticed it: afterwards, and especially during that dreadful time when we were searching for Him, such carelessness seemed to us well-nigh incredible. You may say that it was natural and excusable—but it did not seem so to *us* then—nor does it now. Of course we looked for Him first among our kinsfolk and acquaintance—good people, for the most part, who loved Him too, and were

always glad to welcome Him on the few occasions when He found His way to them. But He was not there. Then indeed our anxiety became consternation, and we returned to Jerusalem to hunt for Him in every likely place we could think of. After three days of this misery, baffled and bewildered, utterly sick at heart, we said to one another, We have done all we can : it may be that we shall never see Him again : let us go to the Temple of God and lay all our sorrow and shame before the All-merciful—even as the good king Hezekiah did. Has He not said, Mine eyes and mine heart shall be there continually ? It was for that purpose we went thither—not with any idea that *He* might be there. But there, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, we found Him—found Him quite unchanged, as much ours as ever.”

To put the story thus is of course to make it a parable of a spiritual experience which innumerable Christian people have gone through from beginning to end. But it is not to put any strain upon St. Luke's narrative, or to give it any twist. He does not say, or imply, that the Holy Child had spent all that time in the Temple courts. The fact that His parents looked for Him everywhere else before they resorted to the Temple clearly shows that they had no natural expectation of finding Him there. They evidently had not brought Him with them with any view to putting Him under the instruction of the doctors. They went at last whither they should have gone at first, because they were at their wits' end, and knew not what more to do. Then the words came into their minds, “ Seek ye my face,” and in seeking the face of God, in bringing quite simply and directly their grief and despair to Him, they found the Heavenly Treasure they seemed to have forfeited, they found Jesus whom they had lost.

And surely our Lord's words, when at last they did find

Him, point not obscurely to this reading of the incident. He did not tell them that He must needs have been found employed about His Father's business. Such a rendering, although possible, is inconsistent with all we know of Him, and of the Father's will concerning Him, at that time. Obviously, His duty lay in obedience to His parents at Nazareth, and in quiet self-development amidst obscure surroundings. But neither did He say in ordinary language that He must needs have been found in His Father's house. That may be the only way to english it intelligibly, but it misses the intentional vagueness of the phrase. When our Lord wished to speak of the outward and visible Temple as the House of His Father, He did so in simple unenigmatical words [St. John ii. 16, compare St. Luke xvi. 27]. There was no possible reason why He should not have done the same on this occasion, if He had meant quite the same thing. If He avoided using the word *οἶκος*, if He employed instead the curious expression *ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου*, it was precisely because this vague and indeterminate phrase left room for the wider and more spiritual meaning which He intended. Used locally indeed it would not, properly speaking, mean "in my Father's house," but "on my Father's premises." Not only however is the article plural, but the noun is not expressed—leaving the mind free to think of any surroundings in which the Father may be found, in which they that seek His face may come face to face with Him. Outwardly and visibly these may be the Temple-courts at Jerusalem: inwardly and spiritually they may be any solitude in which God is found of them that look for Him earnestly and humbly. It is as true now as then that if any good people have lost touch with Jesus they may only hope to recover Him if they seek Him *ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς*.