

Year C Christmas 1 HTK 2021

Every year in Australia 38 000 people are reported missing! You heard it right: over 100 people are reported missing every day. Even after 3 months 2 600 are still missing.

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre uses a variety of methods including a website to profile missing persons across the country. We even have events such as International Missing Children's Day and National Missing Persons Week.

Some are displaced by natural disasters and others are abducted by a distraught parent. An old man, his mind long gone, simply walks away, and teenagers, tired of abuse and chaos at home, they flee for what they suppose will be a fresh start. Some people fake their death, and others are taken with criminal intent.

But one spring day many years ago Joseph turned to Mary and said, "Where is Jesus?" That set-in motion, not a tragedy, but a teachable moment into the mystery of God's dealing with the mind and imagination of kids.

After the Passover festival, Luke tells us, his parents headed home, down that well-worn road to the Jordan valley. Jesus, however, stayed behind in Jerusalem.

Years later he told a story that began this way, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves." He told it that way because he was familiar with that road, that Roman road that headed east out of Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, went over the Mount of Olives, around the village of Bethany, and along the south side of that ravine. On the edge of that stone road was the aqueduct that, to this day, carries water from the hill country down into the Jordan Valley. It still runs strong, a foot deep and is a welcome respite from the dry desert air.

That day this road was crowded with thousands of pilgrims heading home after the holidays. They were on their way to the Jordan Valley, or Galilee, or even further. Friends and family, all of them Jews, traveling, talking, singing, eating, laughing.

For them it was a religious obligation: not a burdensome one, but a delightful interruption of the rough and rugged routine of regular life. "How delightful is your dwelling place, O Lord." That is one of the songs they sang. Then the question: "Where is Jesus?" Suddenly, the joyful journey home becomes a frantic search for a young son.

Two points in Luke's story deserve mention. He reminds us that Jesus was a normal boy who experienced genuine human development—physically, mentally, morally, and

spiritually. The story also hints at the emerging tension between Jesus's filial identity with God the Father and his willing obedience to his earthly parents. Eventually his obedience gave way to a radical disruption, for by the time of his public ministry his own family tried to apprehend him, and the entire village of Nazareth tried to kill him as a deranged crackpot (cf. Mark 3:21, Luke 4:29, John 7:5).

But that's all. These two points do nothing to fill in the thirty years of silence about the hidden years of Jesus. I like to imagine that Jesus's early life was so insignificant, so prosaic, and so secluded in obscure Nazareth that there was nothing relevant to report.

If we let Jesus's silent years stand at face value instead of filling them with some ostensibly deep meaning, they speak volumes in our media-saturated world of celebrity culture, self-promotion, and endless noise. His hidden years point to a counter-cultural spirituality of invisibility and obscurity.

For most people today, and Christians are by no means an exception, personal identity and fulfillment depend upon being well-known not unknown, visible and not invisible, honoured rather than ignored, important instead of insignificant, and in demand rather than out of commission. Jesus was thoroughly invisible for 90% of his life, leaving no footprint of who he was or what he did during those years.

Most of us live hidden and unheralded lives. We live, die, and then will be forgotten to history. We will be lucky if even our grandchildren remember us. Even our Facebook pages will eventually be wiped.

Some believers have *chosen* hiddenness. The fourth-century monastics fled the corruptions of crowded cities to seek Jesus in the vast solitude of the Egyptian desert. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) spent twenty-seven years cloistered in Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky, but nevertheless spoke to the entire world with his prophetic writings. In his memoir *The Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) describes why he left his professorship at Harvard to live and pray among the developmentally-disabled.

For Christians, the delicious paradox is that the missing 90% of Jesus's life, no matter how completely lost to history, was not lost or hidden to God, not by a long shot. Nor is my life or your life.

In the Beatitudes Jesus calls us to give, to pray and to fast "in secret" (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). The unseen Father, says Jesus, "sees what is done" in secret. However hidden and obscure our lives might feel, either literally or figuratively, whether voluntary or involuntary, in that very hiddenness God is redemptively present, just as He was with a twelve-year-old Jewish boy in an obscure Palestinian village.

