

Trinity College Cambridge  
15 February 2015

**FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT**

**Teaching in the Temple**

Holman Hunt's *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple*

Job 23    Luke 2: 41–51

Jane McLarty

This painting caused something of a sensation when it was first exhibited, in 1860. Packed full of symbolic detail, and blazing with sumptuous colour, Holman Hunt had worked on it, off and on, for five years, making use of a two year stay in Egypt and the Holy Land where he also painted his rather more disturbing and enigmatic work, the Scapegoat. It was sold for the fantastic sum of 5,500 guineas, to an art dealer (Mr E. Gambart), and is now in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

What do we see in this picture? We see a moment, I suggest, of liminality in the life of Jesus, in that of his parents, in that of his onlookers, and a moment whose emotional intensity is expressed in the gaze of each character at which we gaze: all oblivious of us, except for Jesus, who alone looks out of the frame to meet our eyes. We, the knowing viewer, see Jesus' future displayed in the elements of the scene, and the boy Jesus in his stance, his tightening of his belt, knowingly prepares himself to walk forward to accept it.

Jesus is 12, Luke tells us: on the brink of accepting the responsibility under the Law assumed at 13. Drawing our attention to this status, there on the limen, the threshold of the space in which they all stand is an ear of wheat: a host of allusions might crowd into our mind – ripeness and maturity; harvest; and the crushing of the grains of wheat to make bread. This is the first step on the path that will lead to the cross.

Mary's embrace accentuates the sense of the boy's inevitable breaking away from the influence of home and family. She leans over him, her embrace displacing Joseph's – or perhaps his hand hovers protectively over them both – while Jesus has just one hand placed on her arm, and with the other, as we have noticed, he prepares for action. Although Jesus' torso is inclined towards her, he is facing away from both of his parents; we see the beginning of independence, and perhaps in his engaging with us, the viewers, rather than his parents, there is a hint towards the reframing of his understanding of 'family' which will lead him to say to his disciples, 'whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'. This is a reunion which anticipates a parting.

We might notice how the colour of the scene accentuates Jesus' centrality – almost all eyes are upon him, and the darker background around him makes the clear blue of his tunic leap forward to the eye: a colour which in tone is balanced by, but in hue contrasted with, the clear red of the Temple floor. Jesus is planted in that space – it is where he belongs

(we might notice over the rosette on the golden door, a quotation in Latin from Malachi 3: 1 which translates, 'The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple') – and yet he also stands over against his setting.

For alongside the touching if ambivalent family reunion, we see the aftermath of Jesus' independent activity in the semi-circle of figures to the left of the scene. The boy whose task is to keep flies away from the Torah scroll, gazes dreamily either at the reunion or perhaps at the dove hovering over the holy family and out into the brightness of the Jerusalem day. Next to him an elderly blind man hugs the Torah scroll to himself, while his neighbour lays a hand of – consolation, perhaps – on his arm. Next to this pair a younger man, holding a smaller scroll, gazes into space with a look of shock. Back in the shadows is a group in various attitudes of consternation.

What has been going on here? Luke tells us that Jesus has been asking questions.

Now, in this scene we see the youthful Messiah anticipating his later work, and when we think of the kinds of questions he was accustomed to ask in later life, the somewhat startled response of the men here might not surprise us. To consider some of them:

- Which is easier, to say 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Stand up, take up your mat and go to your home?'
- Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?
- The baptism of John: was it from God or from man?
- Why does this generation ask for a sign?

And perhaps the most difficult:

- What do you want me to do for you?

And in this the Lord's Messiah reflects the habit of God himself: the history of God's relations with humanity is marked by great questions:

- To Adam and Eve: Where are you? Who told you that you were naked?
- To their son Cain, the first murderer: Where is your brother Abel?
- To Job: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
- To the prophet Isaiah: Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Those of us engaged in teaching and learning will know the importance of questions in this process, and what a range there is: from the (fairly) closed question of fact 'When was the fall of Jerusalem?' to the more interesting (and less answerable) 'Who did Jesus think he was?' It is the question and response that brings a teaching session alive: it is a call to engagement, for the student and teacher to enter into the subject, to take a view, to think about why it matters or why we should care what the answer to the question might be. In the process of questioning both teacher and student ask the other to commit something of herself, himself: to get off the fence and make an intellectual or moral judgement; to make himself, herself vulnerable to judgement in turn.

When we reflect on God's questions, on Jesus' questions, even the apparently straightforward requests for information are far from innocuous. Where are you? Where is your brother?

Our response to such probing is so often defensive, or angry. Teaching and learning can be a painful process, when done properly. To feel underprepared, to be challenged, not to know the answer, to realise the other is better read and quicker thinking, all this is painful for a teacher. To feel that one is under scrutiny and assessment, that after being top of the class in school one is now receiving the ‘could do better’ raised eyebrow, is not comfortable for a student.

The questions asked by God, by Jesus, go far beyond such relatively trivial discomforts: they ask the hearer to look within the self, to see who and where one is in relation to God.

No wonder some of the men who have been responding to the young Jesus look somewhat stunned. And the ultimate consequence of Jesus’ questioning is hinted at in our painting by the scene you can just see in the very background, where a couple is buying a lamb which will be sacrificed to redeem their firstborn son.

The vulnerability of the boy who looks out of the frame at us, leads us back to ponder the nature of some of God’s, Jesus’ other questions; balancing the questions that force us to look within ourselves, are the questions whereby God entrusts himself to us, puts himself at the mercy of the response of the human heart.

- Whom shall I send? What is it that you want me to do for you?

In formulating that response, we must ask ourselves the most difficult questions:

- What is it that we want God to do for us? What is it that we want?

Often, surely, we long with Job to contend with God, to force him to tell us the answers: what should I do with my life? What choice am I to make? What do I really want? Yet if we consider God’s response to Job’s anguished desire to know the meaning of his suffering, it was yet more questions: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

We are forced to conclude that for God, the question is more important than the answer: the journey more important than the arrival. As we contemplate this scene where Jesus stands balanced between his past as a child and his future, with the effect of his questions still churning around him, perhaps we might let the questions in our own heart rise up to meet his gaze. As we do, let’s hear the advice of Rainer Maria Rilke to a young poet:

*Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then, gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, tr. M.D. Herter (Norton, 1954), pp 34–5 – quoted in *Spiritual Direction*, Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird (SPCK 2011), p12.



William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* (1854–5), Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery