

CHAPTER TWELVE IN THE TEMPLE AGAIN

A boy's twelfth birthday was a great event in a Jewish family. Up to this age he was called "little," afterwards he was called "grownup" and became a "Son of the Law." He must put away now the things of a child and behave and be treated as a man. The same strict subjection to his parents as before was not expected of him. He was consulted as to the trade or profession he wished to follow. In the synagogue he wore the phylacteries, narrow bands of parchment inscribed with sacred texts. And he was bound to go up to the Temple at the three great yearly festivals.

The first of these was the Pasch. It commemorated the preservation of the first-born of the Jews on the night when all the first-born of the Egyptians were killed. It lasted seven days. The first-fruits of the barley harvest were offered to God on this Feast. Seven weeks, or fifty days later, came the Feast of Pentecost, commemorating the giving of the Law to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. On this Feast the first-fruits of the wheat harvest were offered. Lastly, in the autumn, when the fruits of the vineyards and the cornfields had been fully gathered, came the Feast of Tabernacles in memory of that time in the desert when the people lived in tents. This was a festival of thanksgiving for the blessings of the year.

Every Jew who had come of age was bound to be present in Jerusalem at each of these Feasts. So great were the numbers congregated together at these times that they often exceeded two millions.

When Jesus, therefore, was twelve years old, He accompanied His parents to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Pasch, joining the caravan which was going up from Galilee. For greater safety against robbers many thousands travelled together, the men and the women in separate companies, the children with either father or mother. As they neared Jerusalem and fell in with other caravans, the concourse of pilgrims grew more and more dense, and in the neighbourhood of the Holy City husbands and wives reunited and finished the journey together.

See Mary and Joseph walking with Jesus between them. There is bustle and noise all around, but they are not distracted; their eyes are ever turned towards Him; their ears catch each sound of His voice. We are told of Him at this age that He advanced in wisdom and grace before God and men; that is, He showed more and more of the wisdom and grace which were perfect in Him from the

first. If ordinary neighbors perceived this, how much more Mary and Joseph?

Each day He was more beautiful and more winning, more lovable and more loving. The Temple to which they were journeying held nothing so holy as this Child of theirs, this little Pilgrim of twelve, and when from the summit of Mount Olivet the dazzling roof of the Holy Place appeared to view, and a shout of joy broke from every heart, they turned to the Boy between them and worshipped Him with profoundest adoration. Yet they were glad to go to the Temple, and, during the seven days the Feast lasted, the blessed Three were seen continually at the various services.

The Paschal lamb had to be without blemish; to be slain in the evening and carefully prepared for the supper, for not a bone must be broken. It was eaten with unleavened bread and wild lettuce. The youngest present had to ask his father the meaning of these sacred rites, and the father was to tell him it was to remind God's people how on the night their fathers were delivered from the slavery of Egypt, a lamb was slain and its blood sprinkled on the doorpost of their houses that the destroying Angel who was to pass in the night and slay the firstborn throughout the land, might spare the dwellings marked by that sign. God had commanded that every year they were to keep the anniversary of that night by eating the Paschal lamb till He should come whom the lambs of the Passover had represented.

So when the Holy Family meets for the supper, Jesus asks the meaning of the ceremonies, and St. Joseph tells the story whilst Jesus and Mary listen. See Mary looking with tenderness and pain on the Boy by her side. His eyes are fixed, now on the lamb before Him, now on the unleavened bread; His thoughts seem far away.

When the Feast is over, the caravan from Galilee returns home. Joseph travels with the men, Mary with the women as before, both generously rejoicing in the happiness of the other. Jesus had gone, of course, with His Mother, Joseph thinks. He is with His father, Mary says to herself again and again through the long desolate day; what joy it will be to see Him when evening comes.

At last a halt is called. The vast multitude stops its march and prepares to encamp for the night. Such a scene of confusion as it is. Such unloading of asses, and setting up of tents, and preparation for supper; husbands coming in search of their wives, children running about, delighting in the hubbub and the prospect of camping out. Joseph and Mary meet. Each is alone. Their troubled look says plainer than words: "Where is Jesus?" Neither has seen Him since

they started. They make inquiries but can hear nothing of Him. They go here and there, threading their way among the various parties settling down for the night. No one has time to listen to them, rough or careless words are the only replies they receive. Darkness falls and with it a stillness. Perhaps now He will come to them. They sit by the roadside and wait and pray. The hours go by. They cannot disturb the sleeping camp, and surely He would have come to them before now had He been anywhere there. He must have remained behind in Jerusalem. Joseph looks at Mary, tired out with her day's march and weary search, but she smiles through her tears and tries to cheer him. "Yes, surely, Jesus will be in the Temple," she says, "let us go to Him." And they set out. She is quite spent by the time they reach Jerusalem. But there can be no rest for her till Jesus is found. They go to the Temple; they search the Courts and the colonnades; they question the talkers; they look among the worshippers. No, He is not here. They go out and wander up and down the still thronged streets of the Holy City, feeling for each other at every new disappointment, trying to keep up each other's hope. Three days they search; the market, the bazaars or shops, the synagogues—all are visited, the Temple again and again. Joseph wonders how Mary keeps up. The anguish of her heart can be seen on her face, but there is never a complaint, never anything in the tone of her voice to tell of aught but patient suffering and resignation to God's Will.

On the third day, as they are passing a group of rabbis or doctors, met, as was their wont, in one of the porticos of the Temple to discuss difficult questions of the Law, Mary is startled by the sound of a Voice coming from the midst of that attentive throng. There is no other voice like that. She lays her hand on Joseph's arm and they stand and listen. Now they can see within the circle. There He sits, the carpenter's Son, the centre of that learned gathering. Every eye is fixed on Him in wonder and admiration. He has put questions to which none can reply; simple questions they seemed and in keeping with His years, and asked with the reverence with which a child should address his elders, yet He waits in vain for an answer. Old men are there whose lives have been spent in the study and explanation of the Law. But they have found their Master to-day and are forced to keep silence before Him.

"Who is this Child? Does anyone know anything of Him?" they ask each other.

Mary and Joseph wait. They must not interrupt Him. He has a work to do here. They wait patiently and delightedly as He answers His own questions and explains hard passages of the Scripture and clears away difficulties from the minds of these men. He shows them that the time of the Messiah as foretold by

the prophets is come and that they must be ready for Him. There is no disputing what He says, for He speaks with authority and such wisdom that all are astonished. Silent and thoughtful, one after another leaves the group. Now the Child Teacher is alone, and Mary and Joseph come up to Him.

"Son, why hast Thou done so to us? Behold Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing."

At last her full heart finds vent. There has been no word of complaint to Joseph, but to Him who knows her pain and her submission to His Will in all things, to Him who cannot misunderstand, she may say in loving complaint:

"Why hast Thou done so to us?" He looks up into her tear-stained face and says tenderly:

"How is it that you sought Me; did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

Mary understood Him and His words and ways better than any other has ever done. But He was God, and what He did and said was not always plain even to her. We are told she did not understand Him here. It was to give her an opportunity of practicing many virtues that He did not tell her He was staying behind in Jerusalem. And He had another reason. He wanted her to know by experience the misery and the pain of separation from Him, that she might be able to feel for those who lose Him by sin, and to pray for them that they may find Him again. He wished also to give an example to those many followers of His who would have to go through the agony of leaving father and mother in order to do their Father's business by working for the salvation of souls. He would comfort them by bearing this trial first Himself. For His was the tenderest of hearts, and it cost Him very much to grieve those who were dearer to Him than all the world beside, and who were so worthy of His love. God's way is to try His servants for a little while and then to reward them. He filled with overflowing joy the hearts of Mary and Joseph as, with the Holy Child between them, they set out on their way home. How sadly they had trod that road three days before! But what a difference the presence of Jesus makes now! They held Him fast, one by each hand. They had Him all to themselves, for the caravan was far ahead. And He was making up to them in all manner of sweet ways for the pain they had had.

When they got home they wondered if He would be any different; if the time was come for Him to be less subject to them; if He was going to continue the

work of teaching He had begun in the Temple. No, He was just the same as before; the twelfth birthday had made no change. There was the same ready obedience, the same eagerness to find out their wishes, to spare them trouble, to make the little home happy for them.