

## 1 SAMUEL 1:20-28 ST JOHN'S, 6.3.16, 9.30 am

### INTRODUCTION

As it's Mothering Sunday today, our readings focus on mothers in the Bible. We heard the story of Hannah, who took her very young son Samuel to the tabernacle, and left him there for Eli to bring up. Like Mary, with whom we're more familiar, Hannah was called to make a great sacrifice. As we focus on Hannah's story this morning, I'm going to begin by filling you in on 'the story so far', in case you don't already know it.

Elkanah and his family lived in Israel during the time of the judges. There was no king, and the Temple hadn't yet been built in Jerusalem. The tabernacle, which the people of Israel had carried with them during their days in the desert, was set up permanently at Shiloh. The Israelite men were expected to go there on certain occasions, to worship and offer sacrifices. The custom in Elkanah's family was that the whole family went to Shiloh once a year.

Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah. Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had some children, but Hannah had none. Hannah was very unhappy. On this particular occasion, Hannah took her troubles to the Lord. She spent a long time praying in the tabernacle. And she made a vow. She told the Lord, *If you give me a son, I promise that I will dedicate him to you for his whole life* (1 Samuel 1:11).

Elkanah and his family returned home, and in due course, as we heard just now, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

This story raises some difficult questions for us C21 western Europeans. But rather than bring our own cultural issues to the story, I think we need to try to see it in its own context. I'm going to focus on Hannah herself, and the first thing which stands out about her is:

### HANNAH'S GODLY CHARACTER

Hannah's godly character shines through every aspect of her behaviour. She (and Peninnah) joined Elkanah on the annual pilgrimage to the tabernacle at Shiloh. According to the OT law, only the men *had* to appear before the Lord on such occasions. For the women, it was optional. But we can see from this story, that for Hannah at least, it was an important part of her annual routine, and of her worship of the Lord.

On this particular occasion at Shiloh, Hannah became so distressed about the fact that she had no children, that it all became too much for her. Think for a moment what you do when things get too much for you. Do you do what Hannah did? Hannah took her troubles, her distress, her desperation, to the Lord in prayer. She spent a long time in the tabernacle, pouring it all out to the Lord. She cried bitterly, but prayed silently. She was so lost in her prayers that she was totally unaware of anything or anyone else around her. She was so fervent that Eli the priest decided she must be drunk!

After Hannah explained herself to Eli, he was much more sympathetic. He encouraged Hannah to believe that the Lord *would* answer her prayer. And then we read that Hannah *went away, ate some food, and was no longer sad* (1 Samuel 1:18).

Hannah clearly had a strong relationship with her Lord. She was able to pour out her troubles to him; and then she was able to leave them with him. Hannah's faith in the Lord was solid enough to allow her to *go in peace*, as Eli bid her to do (1 Samuel 1:17). Remember, she didn't know at that point that the Lord would allow her to have a child. Think for a moment again: do you stop worrying once you've told the Lord your troubles?

We see Hannah's godly character once again when she names her son Samuel. In the Bible, people often name their children symbolically. In this case, Hannah says she called her son Samuel because she *asked the Lord for him* (v 20). So in naming her child 'Samuel', Hannah is bearing witness to the way the Lord has answered her prayer. She knows that Samuel's birth is not an accident or a coincidence. No - it's a direct answer to her prayers, and she bears witness to this in naming her son.

Hannah shows her godly character again by the fact that she has her priorities clearly sorted out. After Samuel was born, she didn't go on the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh until he was weaned (which would have been when he was between two and three years old). As I've already pointed out, women didn't have to go on the pilgrimage. Presumably it

was for this very reason – to allow them to stay at home and care for their children. It's not that Hannah is allowing motherhood to get in the way of her relationship with the Lord. She has every intention of keeping the vow that she's made to the Lord. But Hannah knows her Lord well enough to know that he considers childcare of paramount importance. And for the moment, her child requires her presence at home more than the Lord requires her presence at Shiloh.

Hannah's godly character also shines through the rest of the story in chapter 1, but I'm going to come back to that in a moment. For now, I want to take you briefly into chapter 2, where we can read Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord. The words of her prayer show her godly character once again. In her prayer she gives thanks to the Lord for all that he's done for her. Jesus' mother, Mary, clearly knew Hannah's prayer. Much of what Hannah says here is echoed in Mary's prayer of thanksgiving, which we know as the Magnificat (see Luke 1:46-55). Hannah's prayer is also prophetic, because she foresees the anointing of a king in Israel.

So Hannah's godly character shines through everything she says and does. In particular, of course, it shines through

### **HANNAH'S WILLING SACRIFICE**

In our day and age, we're very aware of the emotional agony which women go through when they can't have children for one reason or another. Culturally, it's perfectly acceptable to be childless, and yet women go through years of IVF treatment because they so desperately feel the need to have children.

Back in Hannah's day, of course, it wasn't culturally acceptable for a woman to be childless. So, in addition to the natural urge of a woman to have children, there was a great deal of external pressure. It was shameful for a woman to be barren. Not only that, but having no children meant that you'd have no-one to look after you in your old age. And of course, in Hannah's case, although Elkanah loved her and didn't blame her for her barrenness, Hannah did have to put up with the torments and humiliation to which Peninnah subjected her.

Finally, though, Hannah's story has a happy ending. She becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a son (much more highly desired than a daughter). And yet, when Samuel is only about three years old, she takes him to Shiloh, and hands him over to Eli! It can't have been easy for her. In fact, it must have been absolutely heart-breaking.

But Hannah had made a vow to the Lord. She knew her Lord well enough to know that he would honour the sacrifice she made. She had entrusted the Lord with her desperate misery in her childless state, and the Lord had honoured that trust. Now the time had come to entrust him with her precious child – but she knew that once again the Lord would honour the trust she placed in him. There are three signs here of Hannah's faith and trust in God as she took the young Samuel to the tabernacle and left him there:

- 1) Hannah and Elkanah brought a sacrifice. It's unclear whether there was one bull or three (v 24) – either way it was more than the

law required. Hannah and Elkanah were expressing their gratitude to the Lord for the gift of their son.

- 2) Hannah acknowledged the Lord's goodness in answering her prayer. She said to Eli, *I am the woman you saw standing here, praying to the Lord. I asked him for this child, and he gave me what I asked for* (vv 26-27).
- 3) Hannah totally surrendered Samuel to the Lord; she didn't try to keep any of her 'rights' over him: *I am dedicating him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he will belong to the Lord* (v 28).

When we put our trust in the Lord, especially at great cost to ourselves, the Lord will always honour that trust and pour out blessing. So let's look at the ways in which the Lord honoured Hannah's faith, trust and sacrifice:

### **CONCLUSION: THE LORD'S GREAT BLESSINGS**

Firstly, the Lord blessed Hannah and Elkanah. After Samuel was born, they went on to have five more children, three sons and two daughters (1 Samuel 2:21). No longer did Hannah have the unfulfilled yearning for a child of her own. No longer did she have to cope with the shame of barrenness. No longer did she have to put up with the torments and humiliations to which Peninnah had subjected her.

So the Lord blessed Hannah and Elkanah. But he also blessed many other people as a result of Hannah's faith. In fact, the Lord blessed all his people through Samuel, and therefore indirectly through Hannah. Samuel became a great spiritual leader. He was the last of the Judges,

and he led a revival of faith in Israel. Eventually, Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king, and then anointed David to succeed him.

Its hard for us to understand this story from our particular cultural viewpoint. I suspect that says a lot about where the Lord comes in our personal priorities! Hannah was devoted to the Lord, and she put the Lord, and his claim on her life, before anything else. Even her own longed-for and beloved child was less important to her than the Lord's claim on her life. Hannah reminds us that 'everything in heaven and on earth' is the Lord's; that 'all things come from' him; and that when we give anything to the Lord, it is only what he's already given us – in the words of one of the offering prayers in the Anglican Communion service, *of your own do we give you*.<sup>1</sup>

There's a challenge for each of us in this story. How does our faith compare to Hannah's? Do we trust the Lord enough that when we take our sorrows to him in prayer, we come away at peace? Do we trust him to take care of the most precious things in our lives?

Where there's a challenge there's usually an encouragement too! The Lord does hear our prayers; the Lord does honour our faith and trust in him; the Lord pours out blessings, not just on us, but on many other people, when we dare to put him, and his claim on our lives, before anything else.

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<sup>1</sup> [Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England](#) (London, Church House Publishing, 2000), p 291