

## HANNAH'S PRAYERS

Pentecost 26 Year B

1 Sm 1:4-20; 1 Sm 2:1-10; Heb 10:11-14,(15-18), 19-25; Mk 13:1-8

Gladstone 18/11/2018

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Well, like it or not, Christmas is just around the corner. Next Sunday we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, which marks the end of the current liturgical year. The following Sunday we are right into the season of Advent and the countdown to Christmas Day—as far as the church is concerned—officially begins.

However, even those of us who are convinced that we need Advent before we can begin to taste Christmas are pretty much surrounded by it already, one way or another. The cat is already out of the bag, so to speak—Christmas decorations are well and truly out in places like BigW and Kmart. For some reason, it feels way too early to be thinking about Christmas. It would seem, however, that I am overruled in that regard.

So, the story of Hannah in this week's lectionary offers us some pause in the midst of our anticipation. It's a story that holds Christmas at bay just a little. And it also honours our almost-there already impatience about the whole thing.

The people of God have been waiting for a long time. They know what waiting is all about. Waiting is often born out of deep longing. There's a feeling that something isn't quite right with the way things are. Something else should be happening, shouldn't it? Maybe that discontent means that God is at work somewhere in all this, we think, we hope, but we're not sure. Is that being faithful or something else? Sometimes, it all feels like absence. But still we wait and want. And wait.

That's where Hannah's story begins—in waiting mode. She wants a baby, and she's heavy with grief and longing. Her husband understands this. He makes regular offerings at the temple, and brings her a double portion to comfort her in her grief. But that's not enough. She doesn't want religious culture. She wants to feel blessed. She wants to know God's work in her life. So she takes it to God.

It's a raw picture—Hannah praying so fervently that Eli thinks she's drunk. But when he confronts her, she's honest with him, too:

*No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.*

Our deepest longings often reflect the upside-down kingdom that God has in mind. Hannah's baby may not have been the key to everything, but with God's grace, her faithful longing would give birth to a new voice of faith to guide God's people. The kind of deep longing that brings our brave and honest prayers to the surface has roots in the depths of God's kingdom. God uses our passions to build anew.

The theme of "barrenness" is well-known throughout the Scriptures. Fruitfulness in having children is always of great financial value to low-income families. More children—particularly male children—provided the potential for increase in production and hence, wealth. A woman capable of reproduction was therefore accorded an increased level of social status in proportion to her fertility. This may seem of little significance in our contemporary society, but it was highly prized in traditional economies, where status was not so much about money, since hardly anyone had any.

Barrenness, therefore, was a source of tremendous shame for both the family, as well the woman, who gets a double-shot of it, first from the community, but then also from her family, who experience her as a "lost opportunity." Even worse, everyone knows that at some point, the barren woman will become a "worthless eater," incapable of providing or caring for herself—and having no children of her own, will one day become a drain on someone else's children's prosperity.

But Hannah's not asking God for a child so that they can increase their wealth. Nor is she asking for a child to protect her well-being in old age. Instead, she promises the child back to God. She asks for a child for relief from her shame, an important point that we should not overlook, because for many who live with shame, it's as debilitating as physical starvation.

Well, God did remember Hannah, and in due time she conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord." He was the boy who learned to listen to God in the night, the prophet who anointed David. He was, as promised, a faithful man of God.

If you read on for a few verses, past the first Samuel reading for today, you will discover that after Samuel's birth, Elkanah wanted to honour the vow right away and bring the infant to Eli. But Hannah said no. She had been made a mother, and she needed to mother. She'd honour her vow once the child was weaned. She'd been childless for so long and now she wasn't going to let her child go into the world unmothered.

It's interesting that the scripture writer included this little detail. Our human relationships are the location of our honouring God. Hannah would not have been faithful if she had too quickly handed her son to Eli. Samuel needed to know something of a

mother's love—something about trust and patience and deep abiding love—if he was to faithfully listen to the call of God in the midst of a noisy, broken world.

And then we have her song—in the second Samuel reading, in chapter 2.

*My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.*

We hear other songs in her words. We hear her older sister Miriam sing of victory and a delivering God who leads people to freedom through the waters. We hear Esther who sings in courage, and Ruth who sings commitment. We hear Elizabeth who also longed for a child, and birthed John the wild prophet in her old age. And Anna who had served in the temple for many years, longing for the redemption of Israel and singing God's praise when she saw Mary's child. And of course, Mary herself, who's faithful "yes" brought forth the long-awaited Messiah.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

The story of Hannah, is a story of salvation. New life comes out of barrenness. Hope rises from hopelessness. Despair is transformed into thanksgiving and praise. By trusting her plight to God, Hannah claimed the new future God can make possible to those in barren, hopeless circumstances. The story has its roots in Israel's past. God had remembered Rachael and she had been given a child (Gen. 30:22). God remembered the Hebrews in bondage in Egypt and delivered them to new life in Israel. Hannah opens her misery and need to God and asks for God to remember her.

Hannah's story also points to the future. It's significant that a story that is to climax in the greatness of David begins with the bereft circumstances of Hannah. Over and over again in the books of Samuel, God finds possibilities for new life and hopeful futures in persons and circumstances that seem impossible by human standards.

But, this is not only a story of God's grace to Hannah and to Israel, it can also be a story of God's grace for us. Through this story we can learn something of the dynamics of grace that might transform our futures and address the forms of hopelessness and pain that we sometimes face.

The song of Hannah that follows in Chapter 2, is one of the Bible's most eloquent expressions, testifying to God as the true source of transforming power. Hannah's song is echoed in the song of Mary, known as the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55). Both songs celebrate a wondrous birth, enabled by God's grace. Both songs look to the coming of the Messiah.

Hannah's song also speaks to one of the most perennial of human temptations: the temptation to believe that we can control our own destiny and perhaps the course of history as well. It helps us to go beyond our own experience and to focus on the character of the God she worships and to whom she gives praise. Out of her suffering and exaltation, she comes to see God more clearly, and as a result, she praises Him for who and what He is.

The experience out of which Hannah sings, offers hope to Israel and to us that a different reality is at work in the world from what we usually acknowledge. Hannah sings of a God whose transforming power can reverse the patterns that the world defines as power. She sings of a God whose might is not wielded hap-hazardly, but who is heavily invested in the welfare of the weak, the powerless, the poor, the hungry, the dispossessed and the barren.

We should also acknowledge that when Hannah expresses her joy and gratitude to God for Samuel, the answer to her prayers—when Hannah expresses her faith in God and her devotion to Him—it is also a time of separation when she will leave Samuel in Shiloh and return to Ramah. God's faithfulness in the past is her assurance of His faithfulness in the future, and thus she can give this child to God. Sometimes faithfulness to God involves sacrifice.

The history of God's salvation does not originate with Jesus or the church. The church is part of the larger activity of God from creation onward. To be part of the church is to be part of a story much larger than the church's story. It is to be related to a God whose transforming power on behalf of the powerless does not originate in Jesus Christ but was already known to Hannah and simply finds new expression in the song of Mary for the church.

As such, it looks forward to the time when Israel will have a new king—the ultimate "King," our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate fulfillment of her messianic prophecy.

*The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."*

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.