

**Sermon for Mount Macedon
15th of November 2009**

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Today is the second last Sunday of the Christian year and the last Sunday of Pentecost. Next week we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, and in a fortnight we'll begin the year again with the first Sunday of Advent, as we look forward to Christmas. So it seems a bit strange that the lectionary, which has spent the Sundays after Pentecost telling us stories of King David, now takes us back to beginning of David's story. Yet in a lot of ways it makes sense to go back to the beginning as we start to look forward to the birth of Jesus, the son of David.

In the book of Judges, we're told of people who are raised by God to lead the tribes of Israel on particular occasions, people like Deborah and Gideon and Samson. The Spirit of God settles on them, and through them God helps the people of Israel. But the book of Judges ends with the words: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes".¹

Samuel, about whose birth we hear today, was the last of the judges. God acted through Samuel to give the people of Israel the king that they were calling for, David. David may be Israel's great king, but the books of Samuel takes a long time to get to his reign. The story begins not with David; not with Saul who preceded him as king; not even with Samuel, who anoints him, but with Samuel's mother, Hannah, a barren wife at a time when to be barren was a cause of desperation. The story begins not with a great man, but with an oppressed woman.

Hannah is one of the two wives of Elkanah. Elkanah's wife Peninnah has children, but Hannah doesn't. It's possible that Elkanah is quite happy with this arrangement; he has one wife for child-bearing and one to love; one commentator translates "Peninnah" as fertile or prolific and "Hannah" as charming or attractive. When Hannah mourns her barrenness, Elkanah says to her: 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?' As far as he's concerned things are fine. But Hannah has all the pain and hunger of a woman who wants children and can't have them; in a society that would see her lack of children as something God has done to her. Hannah follows in the footsteps of the great matriarchs of Israel's history: Sarah; Rebekah; Rachel, and she anticipates Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. All these women were barren until God gave them a child, and in every case the child had a special purpose and was given by God as a gift not just to the mother, but to all the people. Hannah stands in a long line of Israel's mothers.

Hannah is not just barren, she's mocked for her barrenness. Peninnah taunted her: "as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, [Peninnah] used to provoke [Hannah]." Ironically, this would happen just as their husband Elkanah was offering sacrifices to the Lord to cover their sins. After the sin offerings, he would make a peace offering and distribute portions of this offering to his family so that they could eat a meal together celebrating peace and reconciliation. Yet it's at this moment, when peace and unity are to be savoured, that Peninnah is taunting Hannah. Peninnah is a model for how *not* to approach the communion table.

Hannah does what people in her situation have always done – she calls on God. I love the fact that because she's praying silently Eli thinks she's drunk! It's a good thing Eli redeems himself later in the story by recognising that it's God who's calling Samuel, or Eli would be the very model of how not to be a priest. As it is, he adds his blessing to Hannah's prayer, and she leaves comforted. "In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'"

In this beginning of the story which will eventually lead to the kingship of David, we see God working in and through the meek and oppressed. He chooses a barren, despised woman in an obscure family in Israel to bear a prophet and leader of his people. This is the way the Lord always works, as Hannah recognises in the prayer of exaltation that we heard today instead of one of the Psalms. Hannah is an individual woman who has been given a child, but the words she prays are of national thanksgiving.

¹ Judges 21:25.

Her song rejoices that the Lord is the one who brings to life, who gives children to the barren, who feeds the hungry, who makes the poor rich and exalts the lowly. She looks to the future and celebrates that God “will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.” Hannah’s song reminds us that we’re now waiting and preparing for the coming of God’s anointed, and that it’s the Lord who is our rock, strength and protection. It is only the Lord who can grant life. Hannah’s story shows us that he does so in surprising ways and unlikely places.

We are about to enter Advent, when we, like Hannah, will be waiting for the birth of a special child. Because of the astounding and unlikely miracle of the Incarnation the child for whose birth we will prepare is both the son of David and the Lord, God’s anointed one, the Messiah. When Mary is told this she sings a song modelled on Hannah’s, in which she praises the God who overturns all expectations and she voices the deep and dangerous hope that in response to human injustice, God will bring justice.

This is why the very beginning of David’s story is an appropriate reading for the end of the Christian year. We are about to begin a time of preparation. Hannah’s story and her song reminds us that the result of that preparation is not meant to be enormous amounts of food, after all “Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil”. Nor is it meant to be the overwhelming piles of presents that we’re starting to be encouraged to buy. The result of the preparation is for us to be ready to welcome the Holy One. If as part of that preparation we help God in “rais[ing] up the poor from the dust; [and] lifting the needy from the ash heap” then we too can join with Hannah in celebration.