

Sermon for Sunday 19 March 2023 (Mothering Sunday)

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

1 Samuel 1.20-28; Psalm 127.1-4; Colossians 3.12-17; Luke 2.33-35

Father, would you come by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to what you would say to us this morning. We pray in Jesus' name. Please do be seated.

Those of you who are observant will maybe notice that sometimes during the readings I take my sermon notes and I scribble a little addition or a little change, and you may say, 'Oh, for goodness sake, Graham, couldn't you do the work in the study and prepare properly so you've got it ready?' My answer to you would be the same as one of my tutors in college - 'Always be prepared for God to speak at the last minute, no matter how much you've sweated in the study.'

I'm not sure whether it was God speaking, but one of the notes I've just made was, what if tomorrow evening when we have the service where Revd Simon becomes our Rector, and afterwards we celebrated by slaughtering a bull and offering a bit of flour and a bit of wine? Because you notice they sacrificed the bull - doesn't say they ate anything made with flour or drank the wine. How would that be? You can talk back to me. No, not good. Or was it just my ward sense of humour that that jumped out at me this morning? That has nothing whatsoever to do with the sermon.

I'm with the bishops this week, maybe for a rare occasion, that both the bishops and myself are in full agreement. What on earth has our Gospel reading got to do with Mothering Sunday? Or, as we now (sorry, Jerry, Bob, if he was here, our American cousins), we've adopted your Mother's Day. Ripped out of context, a short reading and nothing really to do with Mothering Sunday. So acknowledging that for some Mothering Sunday is a good day and for some, for various reasons, is not a good day, let's see if our readings have anything to say to all of us, not just to mothers and about motherhood as we go through this morning.

Our Old Testament reading, Hannah. Wife of Elkanah. She's not the only wife of Elkanai. There is also Peninnah. Peninnah has had children. Hannah hasn't. Although written later, the psalm we read tells us that children are a gift from God. In the culture of those days, it was seen as an honour, and if you didn't have children, it was dishonouring. So for Hannah, this was terrible and she's prayed at the temple. You may know the story that Eli, the priest sees her praying and thinks that she's drunk or she's mad; but she prays and she has a son. So we have a story here in the Old Testament reading of a woman who wasn't able to have children.

In our Gospel we have Mary; able to have a child, but not expecting to have a child. She didn't long for a child in the way that Hannah did. It was unexpected. One asked for a child, one was asked to have a child, but both of them prayed. Now, we didn't have this in our readings, so you're going to have to bear with me and I should really have printed this off for you. But Hannah prays this - this is after the section

that we've just read where Samuel has been born and she comes to give him up in service of God. Imagine that you've not been able to have a child and here God has blessed you and you have been able to have a child. Wouldn't you want to just hold on to them?

Now, she does go on to have other children, but she didn't know that at that time. And she prays, 'My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in my God.' And later, in her prayer of thanksgiving, 'He raises up the poor from the dust, he lifts the needy from the ash heap. He makes them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.' Does that sound familiar at all?

The Magnificat - Mary asked by God to have a child. She could have said no, but she didn't. She prays, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit, rejoices in God, my Saviour, please look with favour on the lowliness of his servant.' What does she say later? 'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.' Do you see the parallels?

Turn with me if you've got your reading sheet to our reading from Colossians. We have Hannah, who couldn't have children and was blessed with a child and she praised God. We have Mary, who is told she's going to have a child and she praises God. I think Mary knew her scripture well because as well as quoting from Isaiah in her prayer that we know as the Magnificat, she seems to be riffing, to use a jazz term, on Hannah's prayer. It's really interesting to put the two side by side, but what does Paul tell the Ephesians Church? And what can we maybe learn from this today?

'Let the word of God dwell in you richly.' I wonder whether Mary was thinking God did great things for Hannah. It looks like he's going to do great things for me. And out of her soul came these words of praise, riffing on Hannah's words. But for both Hannah and Mary motherhood was costly. Hannah in offering Samuel in the service of God, Mary maybe the same. And as we heard in the reading, she would experience the pain and agony of seeing Jesus on the cross.

The cost of love. Not just love for a child, but love for God. It's costly, and it can be very easy as we read this reading from Colossians that I've asked you to look at, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other, love each other, and that is costly, brothers and sisters.

All I want to say to you this morning is as you reflect on the story of Hannah and the story of Mary, just be aware of the cost of love. But like Hannah and Mary, with gratitude, sing. Sing psalms, sing hymns, sing spiritual songs, riff on Hannah's prayer, riff on the Magnificat, riff on other bits of scripture. Doing everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God, our Father.

Amen.