

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

18th November 2012

1 Samuel 1:4-20, Song of Hannah, Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13: 1-8

In the name of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Elkanah is an iconic "good Anglican"; he regularly went to church (temple), he sacrificed, that is he made offerings, and he gave portions to those he loved. As we read the first reading today, we see that in every way Elkanah appears as a 'good man'; he is in many respects the embodiment of us and of those sitting with us. He would be at home here, and in most mainstream churches, and we'd probably enjoy and speak well of his company.

His caring for Hannah is made evident in the questions he asks of her, and it is a familiar dialogue for everyone; 'What's wrong darling?' is a timeless ask. However, these seemingly caring questions also illuminate a deeper reality; and that deeper truth is also very real for us as well. "Why do you weep?" his first question tells of an underlying sadness; a sadness that lies behind the 'good Anglican' façade. It is a sadness for which Elkanah has no depth of understanding. "Why do you weep?" tells of a naivetė, a shallowness, an on the surface existence and relationship.

In his next question, Elkanah asks about Hannah's hunger; "Why do you not eat?". Again he speaks from a place of naïve simplicity. We all glimpse at times that deepest hunger, and know that it cannot be satisfied with food. "Man cannot live by bread alone" [Matthew 4:4]. What does Hannah hunger for that Elkanah cannot yet see, or chooses not to see?

His next question comes back to Hannah's sadness, but this time he manages to go just a little deeper. "Why is your heart so sad?" Here he no longer addresses the surface sadness of tears, but shows some awareness of the inner place where Hannah's tears spring from. However, as a typical male, Elkanah cannot dwell even with his own question. As he gets closer to the source of Hannah's reality, he seeks to provide a ready solution, a word of comfort that will bring them both back to the surface of 'looking good': "Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

This iconic dialogue is the dialogue of our own realisation, what some call our 'faith journey', more accurately a dialogue of our becoming, the conversation that contemplates truth and that seeks to open us to our fullest reality.

The dialogue between Elkanah and Hannah is contextualised in the struggle that Hannah is engaged in; and that is a struggle for life! Her womb is closed; she has lost, or never found, the capacity to give life. And yet, deep within, her deepest desire has an orientation toward birth.

Hannah is also an iconic figure for us, she represents all who no longer realise their 'Christ-likeness'. We are made in the image of God - the *imago dei*; made in the image of God, every one of us is created for the sake of creation. We each, and all, have an orientation toward creation, toward birth. We have as our deepest desire a hunger to give life and to give ourselves into the creation of life. This is our truest reality, and so that hunger is only satisfied when we give ourselves into the creation of life. It is in giving that we receive, it is in giving life that we receive life; in the emptying of ourselves into the birth of every other we are filled and fulfilled. It is the very activity of God, and is revealed in Christ through his death and resurrection; his giving and his receiving of life.

Hannah is, as we are, barren in the longing of her humanity. Elkanah, like so many peoples of so many faiths, is 'doing the right thing'; and yet is so completely unaware of the real depth of life's truest calling. And the dialogue between them, is the dialogue of everyday life that we all engage in and encounter.

When the Divine, our truth, and our reality as the *imago dei*, reveals itself, when the heart cries and we feel we will be overwhelmed by the Divine flood, we retreat (or even recoil) into the simplicity of our faith. We grasp for air at the surface of existence and for the meal that might fill our emptiness and delude us into satisfaction. Obesity, drugs, alcohol, shopping, television, these and the other "ten sons" we pretend are more than what truly calls us into life.

As we follow the narrative of the first reading, the path to life is more fully revealed. Verse nine provides for the turning point in the narrative; "*After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh*": Elkanah is no longer in the dialogue. The 'good Anglican', the 'good man' seems to have been satisfied in that meal. It could have been a regular meal, to satisfy hunger or, because Shiloh is named, it may also have been a sacred/ritual meal, a communion. Whatever the meal was, Elkanah was satisfied and leaves the dialogue. And for many of us, that will also be the exit point for our Divine encounter, and the exit point for the realisation of our truest and fullest being.

Hannah offers us a more fulfilling option for she remains aware of her deepest desire; and so she engages in a new dialogue, she "*rose and presented herself before the LORD*". There Hannah was to realise the fullness of her being and the opening of her womb; the "*stone was rolled away*". That moment, movement, of change was tangible, and yet was misunderstood by the priest, the gatekeeper of the Temple!

Hannah's movement into fullness of life is iconic of our movement into fullness of life:

She gave of herself.
She gave that which she most desired.
She gave that which she most loved, and that which she most wanted to have and to hang on to.
She gave, in promise, her only son.

"*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*" . [John 3:16]

Hannah makes real the activity of God; and that change in orientation was so illuminating of life that even Eli recognised the reality.

Hannah's orientation toward giving realised her deepest desire, she no longer sought to 'have', for now she sought only to 'give'; and her womb received fertility. Now she "*ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*" Returning to her everyday life with a new orientation she lived into her fulfilment. She conceived, she birthed and she participated joyously in life's re-creation. Hannah is iconic for all of us who seek life's fullness, and for all of us who know the emptiness of longing that clouds our everyday. The activity of giving is the opening of wombs, for it is the very activity of God.

"Therefore, my friends…. have confidence to enter the sanctuary…. by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain….. and.. let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds…." [Hebrews 10: 19-24]

This is but the beginning of the birthpangs

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The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris