

1 Samuel 1:20-28 Sermon for 11am

It's Mother's Day, and so what better time to look at a passage where a mother leaves her toddler at church and goes off home without him!

Maybe that's not exactly what happened, but it does feel a little bit of a strange reading for Mothering Sunday because at first glance it isn't an amazing example of motherhood, and in fact it can feel a bit alien and concerning to us – the idea of leaving a 3-year-old to be raised by an old priest in a temple environment. It's also quite a difficult reading to preach from because it's a bit of a transitional story – it only makes sense within its wider context, so I'll have to fill you in first on what's going on.

Our reading starts with Hannah having a baby boy and calling him Samuel. This baby was special, as all babies are. But he was particularly special because at the beginning of the story, before our reading today, we found that Hannah and her husband couldn't have kids. Hannah was so distressed about this that she prays desperately in the equivalent of the temple at that time, meeting Eli the priest in the process, and God hears her prayer and she gets pregnant. So Samuel is a bit of a miracle baby. In fact, that's the significance of his name – in Hebrew, 'El' is God, and 'Samu' sounds a bit like the verb 'to ask', so Hannah calls him Samuel because she asked God for him.

In our reading, Hannah, as we read, takes Samuel, as a toddler, to the temple. She makes sacrifices, meets Eli again and reminds him of who she is, and tells him the story before leaving Samuel in the house of God and going home. Samuel has been 'dedicated' to the Lord and set apart for God's service.

Then, after today's reading, Hannah sings a famous song of praise and Samuel takes on a ministry in God's house, working for Eli. God calls Samuel in the night and Samuel becomes a mighty prophet in Israel and effectively rules as God's messenger for a while before the people of Israel demand King. This demand is controversial for a whole host of complicated reasons, but Samuel eventually anoints a man called Saul as King. Again, in Hebrew Samuel's name is quite closely related to Saul in its spelling, something which is a significant thing in Hebrew tradition, and so Samuel appears as a key figure who is sent by God in response to a mother's plea, but who leads Israel into, and sets the tone for, the next step of their history. It's a massive and pivotal story in Israel's life and self-understanding.

So today, having run through the story at break-neck speed, we'll just think about what this little fragment of the bigger story does within that story, and what lessons we can learn from it.

Obviously, the first thing that this reading does is to introduce Samuel. As I already said, he is connected back to Hannah's prayer to God by the sound of his name, but also connected forward to the rest of the story by the spelling of his name. The story pivots on this new baby. The first thing we learn about this baby is that he was a gift from God. Hannah and her husband weren't just lucky and eventually got pregnant. There was no fertility treatment. Samuel was a miracle child. Hannah confirms as much by naming him Samuel. He is the child of her prayers. Near the end of the reading, she reaffirms this to the priest, Eli – 'For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him.' There is no question. This child is the result of God's faithfulness to his people as they pray, and the result of this is that a child is born, and Hannah responds in worship

and faithfulness to God. In her barrenness, there becomes birth. In her complaint to God, there births the assurance of God's provision and care.

The first thing we learn from this baby appearing is that God is faithful to his people, and the correct response to this faithfulness is that of trust and worship. It is this posture that Hannah adopts, and because of the way this sets the tone for the rest of the bigger story, it is a picture of the posture that Israel should adopt in its relationship with God. Asking and trusting, followed by grateful worship and faithfulness to God. Samuel's birth sets the tone.

Unfortunately, the wider story is that Israel gets to the point where it flexes its national muscles, looks away from God at all the other nations around it, and wants to be like them: to have a king who will take the place of God as leader of the nation. Whereas the tone here is set for Israel's faithfulness and reliance on God, instead they want to have a king to lead them into battle, to save them when they are oppressed, and to govern them. The stage is set in this story for all of Israel's monarchy narratives, where first God is misused in battle with tragic consequences, and then the line of kings becomes increasingly removed from this posture, set by Hannah, of gratefulness, worship and trust in God.

The second thing we learn from this reading is that Samuel is dedicated to God. This must have been rather heart-breaking for Hannah. The son she had begged God for, she now leaves in the temple. He is barely weaned and yet he is already gone from his family home. As I said, it feels cruel and unusual to us. For Hannah though, this is not a moment of sad regret, although it must have been hard for her. Instead it's a moment of celebration and thanksgiving. For her, to dedicate her miracle son to God's service, since it was God who gave the son to her, was the obvious thing to do. The reading uses the word 'lent' and 'given' but it's the same word in the Hebrew and means to separate or consecrate to God's service. Without this dedication, the history of Israel would have been very different. Without the willingness of Hannah to give back to God what God had gifted her, God would have no prophet to lead his people.

The second lesson in this transitional reading is therefore that not only should our posture be that of trust, gratitude and worship of God, but also that the gifts we receive from God should be made available for God's use. Of course, this doesn't mean that I want everyone to leave their children or grandchildren here at the end of the service! What it does mean is that our posture must be one where we acknowledge what God has given us, and offer it for his service, even if that costs us, emotionally, physically, financially, relationally, and so on. This is really hard, but it must have been for Hannah too, and she phrased it in a tone of worshipful rejoicing.

Samuel therefore grew up in the house of God. And there's something we maybe need to take on board about that too. It is a good thing for children to be steeped in God's house and God's presence. It's not an added extra after sports or days out, but it's a key part of offering ourselves and all we have back to God, a key part of the spiritual development of our children, and a key part of enabling them to find their own calling within God's world.

Today's story is about the posture we adopt towards God and about a mother who gave her one and only miracle son to God's service. I mentioned earlier that Hannah goes on to sing a song of praise immediately after the end of this reading. It is no accident that her song becomes the model for the themes of the Magnificat – Mary's song, much later, when she agrees to be the mother of Jesus. Here again we have a mother, knowing that she would have to give away the son she loved, adopting a posture of trust, worship and faithfulness to God.

In Mary's story, we have God also giving his one and only son into the service of the world in order to undo all the wrong that has been done by the posture of the world changing from that modelled by Hannah, to that modelled by the Kings of Israel, and all humanity. Jesus came as a son dedicated and set apart to save the world. He served God faithfully and obediently and even died at the hands of those he came to save. It is through Jesus - his life, his death and his resurrection – that we can live as citizens of God's Kingdom once again, adopting the posture of thankfulness for what has been done for us, and the life with God that is offered us as a result. This Mothers' Day, we can celebrate the amazing work of these two mothers, Hannah and Mary, and how they offered themselves and their beloved children into God's service, and we can celebrate the salvation of the world and the new life with God that is offered as a result of the faithfulness of their children. Let us, like Hannah, offer ourselves for God's service in whatever he may call us to, knowing that all we have is from God and we live to serve him always. Amen.