

'Good news for those who need it'

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1 Samuel 1: 4 – 20 Mark 13: 1 - 8

"Woohooo!" That's the quote from Hannah in this story. It has relief and jubilation bursting out of it! It may seem like a peculiar contrast with Jesus talking of the temple being torn down and the importance of reading the signs of the times. 'Beware,' says Jesus, 'let no one lead you astray.' But I'll suggest, both end up being more about beginnings and God's justice for the poor, than anything too scary. And it's easy to see Hannah's story as one of answers to prayer and good news to celebrate, but the gospel announces a new beginning out of calamity.

The view of the Temple stones, later ones than those in 1 Samuel; and their ruins is a reminder that the material things that seem most permanent and solid to us, are not worth putting our hopes in.

Hannah grieves. So, Elkanah doubles his sacrifices and pleads with her: "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" No answer is given. It's true, isn't it, sometimes we don't get the anguish of the other person, even a spouse.

And there's more good human insight here. Peninnah's taunting... isn't it the case that our agony, our lack, is inevitably made much worse because we compare ourselves to others, or are unflatteringly compared, or even pitied? Peni here wields a label: Hannah is 'barren'. It makes Peninnah feel better about herself perhaps. But God cares not a bit about our

limitations or labels, we'd be much better off not to use them too!

The text reminds us that Hannah wept — a lot. Finally, Eli, the priest saw her praying and thought her drunk. This is deeply personal, desperate, raw prayer: total vulnerability, inability, nowhere else to turn.

So, when she is answered, she prays with relief, 'my heart exalts, God raises up the poor and lifts the lowly.' When she got the news of what she had long hoped for, she gives a wonderful expression of joy, tinged also with justice. "The bows of the mighty are broken," she proclaims, 'the Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts up the needy from the ash heap.' One normally without a voice, is in the end being heard. This is turning upside down of the normal order.

But then she kept the outlandish promise she'd made in her desperation. Trying to coax God into giving her a child, she pledged to give that child right back to God. She could easily have reneged on the deal once she cradled her son. He was all she'd wanted. And in those days, a son was your social security, the one a woman needed to care for her in old age. But she took the boy to Shiloh and left him there to serve in the temple as an apprentice to Eli.

Much of what we see in the bible is unfamiliar, until we begin to understand and see through the strangeness to the humanity we all know and experience ourselves. In the ancient near east, some three thousand years ago, tribal people were becoming settled in a new land.

In the ancient near east, family were all important. The gods of the neighbours were fertility gods, mother figures. Success was measured in the size of the herd and the number in the family. Very different to here! And for Hannah, there's no infertility treatment. No IVF program, public or private. There is only the hope of a miracle – so she prays to God!

There are many things we can pray for and pray about, but the context of the story makes it very clear to us readers what Hannah was praying for – without hearing her silent words. Eli, the priest gets it all wrong – but they manage to sort out the misunderstanding, Hannah goes on her way with a blessing from Eli. The blessing turns into the joyful arrival of a child and the answer to Hannah's prayers.

I like the fact that this is a woman that God listens to and that the priests didn't get to edit this story out or lock up the files in some secret dossier. The story gets out – for our benefit.

But this is not just a cute family story of mum making good, and not just a story of successful piety where earnest praying is rewarded. Taking in the wider perspective, this is the introduction to the story of Samuel, the last and most famous of the judges of Israel, the one who anoints Israel's first kings.

Interesting, isn't it, that in these two and a half thousand year old stories, that it's the faith of strong women that is behind great stories of faith. It's a timely reminder to listen for excluded voices, and of working towards a positive future for all. While there's an historic and political background to the story of Samuel, we shouldn't lose

sight of the fact that most of the first two chapters of this major book of Hebrew scripture is devoted to the painful story of Hannah. Her story stands in a long line of matriarchs of Israel, where the birth of Samuel, like that of Isaac to Sarah is a long time in the coming.

It underlines the nature of God's involvement in the world through God's people. The Lord God is shown to work through those least likely; in many ways oppressed or sorely placed in the world. It's through the meek, to use the words of Jesus, that we see the working of God's ways.

God chooses a barren, despised woman in an obscure family in Israel to bear a prophet and leader of the people; God chooses an aging barren mother to be the ancestor of Israel and God will choose a young woman at risk of rejection and worse, if found pregnant before engagement, to be the mother of the one who will be the hope of all his people.

As we approach Advent again and look forward to the joy of Christmas, this story reminds us that all those within our society who are rejected by others; the abused, the homeless, the drug addict, the asylum seeker, persons of minority faiths, the newly arrived are the ones with whom God works and whom God calls his own. In the end, it's good news for the poor.

The gospel has a focus on the future too, but here with warnings. Beware and don't be led astray. Many calamities will happen – it's business as usual in this less than perfect world. Jesus warns, stick to what we know. And it's interesting that the discussion happens when the disciples say how nice the temple buildings are; trust

not in the buildings is Jesus answer, "all this will be thrown down." The future is not in the buildings. The things that seem like the end are not the end, but the pains of something new being born. The signs in the world are birth-pangs. That is, a time of pain that marks the hope of new life. Hannah and the gospel share the same hope.

Community, relationship, new life, family, devotion to God's ways – as Hannah knew, these are the important things – and Jesus ethic of love,- to give relationships the environment in which to grow healthy and thrive.

In Hannah's story, we find that God listens to prayers; it's the medium of the relationship. Not an answer to everything or a key to the future, and not without misunderstanding! But prayer is a good path for heading towards a healthy future. A helpful reminder of the good news that God 'raises up the poor and lifts the lowly' and this is where we should place our trust.