

## **The Ones we never had**

*1 Samuel 1:4-20, Mark 13:1-8*

*18 November 2018*

We have just passed the season of remembering when we looked back and registered once again with deep sadness the passing of those who had been lost in wars and other armed conflicts. The season, when we made renewed vows for the future to work for peace. And just recently we have heard the news about the raging wild fires in California claiming many dead and many more injured, or unaccounted for.

In contrast to those weeping for their lost loved-ones Hannah, the main character of our OT reading is a woman weeping for the child she never had. As we listen to her story, it would be easy to step over her grief and heart-break and concentrate on God's goodness, which eventually did give her a child. Or to go down on the route of understanding it in a metaphorical way and say her great desire to have a child symbolises Israel's long-standing desire for a king of their own. In a way this could be quite a fruitful way for interpretation, as we know that the child to be born to Hannah, Samuel, became the prophet responsible for finding and anointing Israel's first King, King Saul.

But, perhaps, for once, today we could focus on Hannah as a childless woman, and consider her on her own right, as someone who represents a number of us, who never had children. Although our reflections center around the women's plight in this matter, I do want to acknowledge that in many cases men can feel the pain of childlessness as keenly as women do. It has to be said that we do not hear many sermons on the subject, yet the Bible does not shy away from it. In fact, it is raised time and time again, if only to highlight the God of mercy who hears the cries of barren women.

We remember Sara, Abraham's wife, who couldn't give her husband a son and heir until well beyond the normal child-bearing age; Or Elizabeth, wife of the Temple Priest, Zechariah in the NT, who became the mother of John the Baptist at an advanced age after decades and decades of childlessness. And of course, there is a good reason why preachers are not keen to deal with the theme. It is a pastorally delicate question and it is hard to expect true understanding from those who have not gone through it themselves.

So, maybe it has to come from one, who knows at least some of the implications of childlessness. I say, 'some', because, of course, no two women would experience it in exactly the same way, so hollow generalisations would not be helpful.

There may be those who, decide not have children. We may have misgivings about this, thinking that it is the duty of women to have children, but without hearing their reasons, we are in no position to criticise them. Then there are the ones, who would have dearly loved off-springs of their own, but, for reasons beyond their control, couldn't. How could we know their darkness and their pain that never goes away? And finally, there are the mothers with incomplete pregnancies, or the ones losing their children at births. All of them are individuals with unique experiences who deserve our consideration and deepest respect for what they have lived through.

As we reflect on Hannah's story we see the different layers of her pain, some of which are still around in our own society. In ancient Israel, just as in other cultures of the time, women's worth was measured by their child-bearing capacity. Women with no children were targets of ridicule and taunting by other women, as we heard in our OT reading: Peninnah, the rival wife, who did have children, used to 'torment and humiliate Hannah' because she did not have children. Now you may think this is old history and we have progressed far beyond that now. Well, I am not so sure.

Someone told me the story of how she first met her prospective parents-in-law, in the 1940s. When her fiancée introduced her to his father, the old gentleman looked her all over, asked her to turn round and then announced that she would do, for she had 'nice, wide, child-bearing hips'. Can we imagine the effect those words would've had on a young bride?! She said she felt like walking out right there and then! Of course, we do live in a more sophisticated society now with advanced biological and scientific knowledge at our disposal. We have found out how to prevent unwanted pregnancies, we know that the so-called 'barrenness' is not always just a woman's problem, but childlessness still presents grave difficulties, which, in some cases, no amount of science or technology can overcome. And the bearing of it becomes even more 'unbearable' because of our modern assumption that having children is not a privilege, but a right.

Well, perhaps we do not make the mistakes that Peninnah made when she tormented and humiliated Hannah in those brash,

insensitive ways, but I have witnessed before now older parents discussing their children, in not always positive terms, simply because the grandchildren were not forthcoming according to their expectations. And within any community, even in church it is so easy, isn't it just to throw away a thoughtless remark like, "you don't seem to be in any hurry to become parents, are you?" or "Your children are taking their time over starting a family!" Maybe, Hannah's story can give us a warning not to presume to know better what people should or shouldn't do. Especially, if we are not in possession of all the facts and reasons involved. And that we, as a church community, are called to be a welcoming and comforting place where pain of childlessness, and indeed any kind of personal pain, may be safely shared and accepted.

But beyond the social expectations, in Biblical times childlessness also had religious implications. Children were regarded as gifts and blessings from God, which meant conversely that the lack of them put a question mark behind the religious standing of those who were not that way 'blessed'. Or it could even be regarded as an outright punishment for some hidden sin. According to our story Hannah – whose name means 'favour', – is regarded as being out of favour with God. This is why she is not comforted by her well meaning husband's love alone. I rather liked the insight of some women commentators when they said: Hannah would have been more comforted if Elkanah said: 'You are more to me than ten sons' rather than 'Am I not more to you than ten sons?' But, clearly, the question goes beyond a husband-and-wife relationship, it becomes something that concerns God, or at least God as God is perceived.

There is always a danger when our religion makes us understand God in these dualistic terms; The God who gives, or withholds gifts with no reason at all, or because of some rather questionable reasons. This is one of the deep problems Paul Young, author of *The Shack* struggles with in his book. And these are the same thoughts the ancient author of the Book of Job struggles with. Or the thoughts the author of The Book of Samuel portrays in Hannah's story. How to understand God? Is this a *God*, who needs to be bargained with, '*if you just grant me this one wish, I will do this, or that for you*'? Actually, this sounds quite familiar in our own times too: in desperate situations that's how most of us still pray: 'help me now, and I promise....' Just like Hannah in this ancient tale. She

makes a promise and her promise of giving away the longed-for child is very telling and it shows up the mixed motifs of her unhappiness. She may genuinely want a child to love and cherish, but she also wants to be reassured that she is as good as any other woman and she wants to be reassured that God is on her side and she is not being ignored or punished.

Now, the God we know through Jesus – who, by the way was childless himself – is the God of love and compassion, who wants all God's creatures to have a meaningful and fulfilled life. For some of us the fulfilment may indeed come through children and family, for others of us it may come in countless other ways, if only we are open to the possibilities and are willing to act upon them. For Jesus it came through an amazing vocation and discovery about God, which had changed the world. So, being childless is not an inferior state, for "those who walk through life with no children walk as Jesus walked and walk in his company" – says the Scottish preacher the Revd Andrew McLellan.

In our understandable anxiety for wanting to live a good life we find safety in a predictable time-table: love is followed by marriage, marriage is followed by children; children are followed by grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. But not all of our lives are like that. The uniqueness of our lives arises from life's unpredictability and from all the unexpected variations that any new day may bring to any of us. In our Gospel reading the disciples are beset with the same anxiety, they want to know the pattern of the future, the time-table for things to come, in their case about the fate of the Jerusalem Temple. But Jesus directs their attention back to the present, saying that their task is watchfulness and faithfulness and alerts them to the responsibility they all have to resist the misleading forces pulling them this way or that. And the experience of millions of Christians down the ages affirms the Apostle Paul's summary, which is as valid in the question of childlessness, as it is in world politics, or in the future of the Church: the Love of God is stronger than anything else and nothing, but nothing can separate us from that love. May that love surround us, strengthen us and give us dignity and purpose all the days of our lives. Let it be so.

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