

READING 1 Samuel 1:1-28

SERMON

Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-28)

We come this evening to someone who is very close to the heart of Sue and me. When Sue was pregnant with our first child we went through the name game. What will we call our first born? After a while we thought boy or girl might wear a bit thin, so we had to call it, as it was then, something and 'ey you' seems a bit impersonal.

Well it so happened that we were called to the story of Hannah and we both like the name, liked the story and knew no child that put us off the name. Me being a teacher and Sue at that time working as a nurse in a Children's hospital – we knew a lot of children and some names therefore became a right turn off!

But there was one problem with Hannah – it was that in Nottingham where she was born, they have similar problems with one letter of the alphabet that Londoners have and Essex people have. That is the letter 'H' and so Hannah would have come out as Anna and we did not want that, even though Hannah is a forerunner of Anna.

So we decided to go with Rebecca Hannah if we had a girl. I can't remember what it would have been for a boy, but I seem to recall that Timothy was high on the list. So Hannah is special to us when Rebecca was born and it seems to be more relevant today with us.

But let us look at Hannah. 1 Samuel 1:1

“There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.”

(1 Samuel 1:1-2 NIV)

We know more about the ancestry of Elkanah, the husband, than we do about Hannah. But that is how it was then, sadly for ladies. Genesis talks about men and women being partners and helping one another, but men soon made it so that they were more important than women. In this story of Hannah there are two men, two women and one God.

But back to Elkanah for the moment, one of the men. He was probably quite well known as his ancestors are given, but outside of this reference, no more is known about him. Also no more is known about Hannah's ancestry.

We do know that Hannah means 'grace' or 'gracious'. But before looking at the incident with Hannah, let us look at the other three characters – none of whom cover themselves in glory. Firstly the two men – neither of whom do themselves any favours.

Elkanah - Firstly we have Elkanah, who means well, but really he fails. Elkanah is a pious man who loves God and every year they make this trip to Shiloh to worship God which ended in a feast for the people giving a sacrifice. The idea was that you gave your offering to the priests and then you received some parts of it back so you could end the occasion with a meal, which is why in verse 4 we read

“Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb.”

(1 Samuel 1:4-5 NIV)

Elkanah loved his wife, so he gave her this double portion, but all this did was to show up her loss, her difference – she had no children. Sadly in the Old Testament we see quickly creeping into the scene the garden concept of marriage. The garden concept is that the man plants his seed in the woman who is represented by a garden. Therefore if the seed does not grow, it must be the garden which is at fault and not the seed, and so if your garden fails, you move on to another garden. In Abraham and Sarah we see this when Abraham is given by Sarah, Sarah maidservant, Hagar to have children for Sarah vicariously, or it could be thought of as surrogacy. There was never any thought that the man might be at fault, or both parties at fault.

So perhaps Peninnah, the other wife was given to Elkanah to make the marriage complete by given them all a baby. But it did not work. Elkanah’s love for Hannah caused jealousy and Paninnah strucl out with the weapon she had, her children to Hannah’s none. Why doesn’t Elkanah stop the provoking? Was he deaf? Or did he not see it? We are not told, but we are told he says to Hannah, verse 8

“...”Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8 NIV)

“Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” Not the right thing to say to a woman who does not have children. But at times we all say crass things when we do not mean them. The childless couple to who is said statement like

“Well, you can really enjoy yourself.”

Or

“What do you know, you have never been parents!”

Such hurtful things, but some remarks are just because people do not think. Like

“When you have children, you’ll know what I mean.”

The couple may desperately want children, but it is not happening. Elkanah loved his wife Hannah dearly, but was clumsy in his remarks.

Let us not be clumsy in our remarks to people and try to recognise the feelings of others.

Eli – so let us turn to Eli, the father of Hophni and Phenehas. These two are described later as wicked men and have no regard for the Lord, even though they are priests. Verse 12, chapter 2

“Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD.” (1 Samuel 2:12 NIV)

But when Eli see Hannah praying, he goes up to her and says, verse 14

“...Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.” (1 Samuel 1:13-14 NIV)

She was drunk. Is this a social comment on society at that time? That people came to worship God drunk. We already know the priests were wicked, so why not come drunk. Surely not though in a Christian church?

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.” (1 Corinthians 11:20-21 NIV)

So reads the letter to the Corinthian church. They were eating and drinking at church their love feast and some were over indulging, getting drunk and allowing others to go hungry. Sadly it can happen now. So sad that people who should be leading others to God had not thought about God and were acting against God. Do pray for church leaders today that this will not happen, even though we know it does from watching the news.

Peninnah – So lastly we come to the other wife, the one with the children, the constant reminder to Hannah of what she did not have. And to make matters worse we read, verse 6

“And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.” (1 Samuel 1:6 NIV)

So much for womankind sticking together. For a woman, who has not had children, but who desperately wants them, this is an awful area to tease and provoke. Of course it is also very difficult for a husband in this situations, as well, for both of the couple. Take care over what is said, what is even joked about because childlessness is a very subject that can go very deep in its pain and can so easily be brought to the surface, because it is never very far away from the surface, even if it is not spoken about.

So now we turn to Hannah – this woman of God, who so wanted a child, but was childless, who had to put up with clumsy remarks from her husband, false accusations from the high priest and taunting from another woman, all happening on an occasion which was supposed to bring happiness and joy! You have to sympathise with her and at times with those who find coming to church difficult because of circumstances in their life. But notice that Hannah did not stay away, but kept coming to worship – she only stopped when she was happy, strange as it may seem, but she could not as her child had to be weaned – something that went on until the child was usually 2 or 3 years of age and not just 6 months as it is in this country.

Hannah does not give up, verse 9

“Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD’s temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD.”
(1 Samuel 1:9-10 NIV)

She kept going back to God even though her heart was breaking. The NIV speaks of **bitterness of soul**, other versions speak of *deep anguish*, others of being *crushed in soul*. She was in a wretched position, but she kept on going back to God.

So often we can give up when the going gets tough. I have had conversation with people who are going through hard times and talk about they must be bad, or God must hate them, but I have to say to them that they have more faith than those for whom life is relatively easy and they haven’t got any problems that resemble the ones that the person has.

Hannah kept going back to God and even strikes up this bargain with God – this vow, this promise. If God gives her the one thing she desires above all other things, then she will give it back to God i.e. she will give up the child that she so wants so serve in the Temple. Verse 11

“And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."” (1 Samuel 1:11 NIV)

She was prepared to give up for God the very thing she wanted. Would you make a vow like that and keep it. Words are easy to say, but actions are dearer. Hannah did not know when Samuel was born that she would have any other children and although she would visit him even year, I am sure that when she left, she probably cried buckets on the way home. Tears of joy and sadness mixed.

But she kept her vow. She didn't try and change it, or spiritualise it – she kept it fully. If we do this with God, do we do that? Do we follow Hannah's example or try to wriggle out. Do we do as much as we can for God, or a little as possible? If the Bible says do this, the Word of God that we have pledged to follow, do we then make excuses as to why we do not do such and such.

“Society does it, so why not me.”

“Lots of others do it, so why not me.”

“It is too difficult for me”

I wonder how easy it was for Hannah to give up Samuel as a young boy. What do many of us give up for God that is comparable?

Childlessness is a difficult thing to go through and in this country more and more couples are experiencing it for one reason or another and at times it does not work out the way it did for Hannah. Now we have adoption and other means, some causing more ethical problems than solving them. All couples in this situation need our love and understanding and very often to talk about it. Very often they don't because they feel the awkwardness of the other person or people. We need to listen to people's hurt and not be like Elkanah, or Eli, although he comes good later when he says

“..."Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."” (1 Samuel 1:17 NIV)