

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Romans 8:18-27

November 18<sup>th</sup> 2018

### *Hannah's prayer*

It would seem from a reading of the Bible that when God is about to do something new, to take some new initiative, it begins with a miraculous birth - and in just a few weeks' time we will be celebrating the classic example of that, in the Christmas story. Our reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Samuel this morning gives another, earlier example. For the first time in it's history, Israel is about to have a king. It's a decisive moment in Israel's story though it's a controversial move, one that God opposes. But it's going ahead and it will decisively alter the future of Israel - and, indeed, the world - so make way for the arrival of Israel's first monarch! But first, there is a woman who must be blessed with a miraculous birth.

Her name is Hannah and in our reading she is a sad and tragic figure. She is one of two wives belonging to a man called Elkannah and while she is barren - 'the Lord had closed her womb', we are told - her rival, Peninah is fertile, even though Hannah is Elkannah's favourite. And we can sympathise with Hannah. In those days a woman's chief function was to bear children - that is why they were needed. And it is quite possible that a woman would rely on her children for security in her later days and her identity was bound up with her children. So pity the barren woman! And poor Hannah. No doubt because she is both Elkannah's favorite and yet barren, she must endure mocking and provocation from Peninah. Hannah is an object of humiliation. And we can feel the force of her anguish, as we find her in some kind of temple in a sacred place called Shiloh where we are told that she was 'greatly distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly', pouring out her misery - 'pouring out her soul' as she puts it - and trying desperately to cut a deal with God. She describes herself as 'a woman deeply troubled' and she pleads that she be not regarded as a 'worthless woman, 'for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.' Who knows? Maybe in her desperation she believes that her prayer has a better chance of being heard in a temple, on holy ground. This is a woman on the edge - socially, emotionally, psychologically. And so fervently did she pray that the priest on duty in the temple, Eli, thought she was drunk.

I wonder what it was that made her appear drunk? Was she swaying? Rolling around on the floor, writhing? Was she muttering beneath her breath,

incomprehensible? And here we get such a striking contrast. There is Eli, on the one hand, and he is a man and a priest. His business is order, control. Under his direction things in the temple operate strictly and with regulation. He it is who synchronises the human and the sacred. He it is who directs the choreography between God and human beings so that we engage with God rightly and according to the rules. He is the master of set-piece religion. And then on the other hand there is Hannah, and she is the opposite: a woman, a ‘worthless woman’. She is disruptive, disorderly, spontaneous and chaotic, a threat to set-piece worship. And of course, throughout history and often with catastrophic consequences the feminine has been associated in many cultures and societies with chaos, with threat. And so the submission of the female to the male is the subjection of chaos to order – and thus patriarchy is legitimated and enforced. And God, of course, is on the side of order, and patriarchy. And here Hannah lives up to that stereotype. She is acting like a drunk in the hallowed halls of the temple – not knowing of course that in due course there will come one who will also cause a scene in the temple, and inject a little chaos in the name of God – but that is another story for another time. But this woman, this threat to good order must be restrained: ‘how long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine!’ says the voice of control, the priest. But Hannah will not be so easily silenced and she will not leave until she is granted blessing and peace by Eli.

Order - and disruption. Here they come face to face and in the stand-off Hannah is heard and her prayer is answered. And we meet that tension, that stand-off frequently in Scripture – I’ve already referenced Jesus in the temple but there are other instances. Turn to the Book of Acts in the New Testament and we have something similar. In the first, explosive days of the early Church in the days after Christ’s death and resurrection the we have the disciples in Jerusalem and the Spirit of God has been let loose and suddenly the disciples are out on the street and they are speaking in a babble of tongues and the priests are terrified because there is a threat to order. The finely-tuned procedures of the temple risk disruption. And the disciples are dismissed as drunk, just like Hannah. But that is the thing about the Spirit – the Spirit is often chaotic, and no wonder there is a long tradition of viewing the Holy Spirit as feminine, and disruptive. And indeed there is a tradition in Celtic Christianity of seeing the Holy Spirit not as a dove but as a wild goose, for where the dove is demure and gentle and peaceful the wild goose is noisy and clamouring and intrusive.

But of course we prefer our religion ordered – we are Presbyterians after all. We like everything to be done decently and in order. We are on the side of Eli the priest. Our religion has been massively influenced by the French lawyer John Calvin who exhibited his lawyerly skills in his great legacy to Protestantism, his book ‘The Institutes of the Christian Religion’ which was systematic and structured – ordered and lawyerly, just like the faith it promoted. But the trouble is that ordered, structured religion can sometimes come between us and God. It can keep God at a safe distance. It can keep us locked into procedure and formality such that we lose an immediacy with God, and encounter with God. The American writer Annie Dillard famously observed, ‘it is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets.’ After all, what might happen if the spirit of drunkenness, the spirit of disruption should come - if the wild goose should flap her wings?

There has always been that other side of Christianity. Right back in the second century there was a movement called Montanism which featured trances and ecstatic utterances. And in later times Quakers sought a more direct and personal relationship with God, doing away with formal liturgy and ritual, seeing it as an obstacle to God. And Quakers were followed by Shakers, so-called because of their ecstatic behaviour during services. And isn’t interesting that women played a far greater role and had a far higher profile in those movements than in formal, established religion? And it is significant that Pentecostalism is experiencing a huge surge in the world today – especially among the poor: in parts of South America it is now stronger than Roman Catholicism as people feel the need to throw off the formalism and ritual of established Christianity and to get real with God and the Holy Spirit of God.

That, surely, is what Hannah was up to. In the stilted, starchy decorum of temple worship she was like a drunk in the gutter, wrestling and pleading with God. And when I imagine Hannah in the temple and hear of her impassioned prayer there is one word that comes to mind, and that is ‘groaning’. The passage tells of her deep distress, her bitter weeping and it tells us that she was praying silently though her lips moved and this seems to amount to a kind of inner groan, a sighing – a deep, visceral yearning. Such a groan comes less from the head or the heart and more from the gut. We find other instances of groaning in Scripture. Right at the very beginning of the story of God’s people Israel in the Book of Exodus we find them in slavery in Egypt,

exploited and oppressed and we read that God heard their groaning and remembered his promises to Israel's ancestors. And that provokes God to act. Somehow the groans of the people move God, literally, to intervene. And we notice that in the Bible if we go back right to the beginning we find that God speaks creation into being - creation begins with a word: in the beginning God said... and there was.. bringing order out of chaos. But if creation begins with a word, redemption – salvation, liberation – begins with a groan, the groaning of slaves. And we are reminded of a day centuries later when God in the flesh, God in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, stood at the grave of his dear friend in a village outside Jerusalem and we are told that twice Jesus 'groaned' – groaned in his spirit, groaned in himself. And then he cried, 'Lazarus, come forth' and out stepped the dead man, liberated from the tomb. This is the heart of prayer – not fancy words, not well-ordered, carefully-crafted sentences, not set-piece prose, but just a groan, a sigh – a profound stirring of the human spirit.

And in such a stirring of the human spirit, we encounter a stirring of the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit. For all this takes us to our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, where the whole creation is pictured as groaning: 'for the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains... as we await redemption...'. And the echoes of the Exodus story are unmistakable. But we are told that Holy Spirit of God is groaning with us, feeling our pain: 'for the Holy Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words' as Paul puts it. And those groans of the Spirit find expression in our prayers.

I wonder, what provokes such groans in you? Are you groaning this morning? Perhaps it is some personal burden that you are carrying, some inexpressible loss or grievance or pain. Or maybe it's the madness of a world that seems drunk on power, with tyrants strutting and indulging their folly. Or maybe it's the sheer intractability of the world's problems, the double-binds in which we are trapped and which leave our leaders helpless. And we groan. We sigh. And we feel helpless too. Well, listen. In the groaning, listen for the groaning of God's Spirit. And listen for the groans of Hannah. And with her, turn those groans into prayer. Beyond the order and routines of worship give expression to the pain of the world. For God is groaning with you. And he hears your inarticulate sighs. And God is moved. And so, in the words of Eli, 'go in peace: the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.' Amen.

Holy and gracious God,  
we your people gather here this morning  
to praise and to worship you,  
to honour you as our God,  
to listen for your Word to us,  
and above all to encounter you here.  
We long to leave this place knowing  
that we have met with you  
and so looking to meet with you again  
in the ordinary days of the week.  
But living God we know that we can be good at worship,  
we can go through the motions,  
our familiar routine – and yet somehow we can miss you.  
We know that sometimes the very familiarity of our worship  
can keep you at arm's length.  
And, living God,  
We know that there are other things  
that keep you at a distance:  
wrong thoughts, wrong words, wrong actions  
that distance us from you and from one another.  
Living God,  
have mercy upon us and forgive us.  
Break through our defences and draw us close to you  
in forgiveness and in grace;  
Send your Spirit into our hearts  
and inspire us to live lives worthy of you, our God.  
We pray these things in Jesus' name  
And in his words we pray together, saying...