

## Sermon for St Andrew's URC

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018

1 Samuel 2.1-10    Hebrews 10.19-25    Psalm 16    Mark 13.1-8

Last Sunday, Remembrance Day, I was upstairs during the most of 10am service at St Mark's with a group of children aged 4 - 10 at Godly Play. The story being told was that of Jesus stilling the storm, told simply and with a few props, many of which are also used in the story of Jonah. At the end, the storyteller asked the children, as always, a series of wondering questions- to which there are no correct answers but which invite conversation and exploration together. One of the questions was, 'I wonder what was most important about this story?' An older child observed that this story was about Jesus bringing peace, 'And today we are thinking about peace and all the people who have died in wars'. After that they were off, and talked about Remembrance; they made the connections all by themselves, just as we had hoped that they would. But another question also prompted a profound response and it's that which has stayed with me. When asked, 'I wonder what you liked most about the story?', a child of about 4 said something that I'd never thought about before, answering, 'I liked it that Jesus was with his friends'. Simple, child centred, profound. For that child the most important part was that Jesus was not on his own - that he was with other people. Jesus could sleep on a cushion because he trusted his fishermen friends to sail the boat; and then, when they needed him, he could still the storm.

That was last Sunday - but I've carried that thought all week - the child's perspective of faithfulness and trust – which I think is a thread we can see running through today's readings too. I'll come back to Hannah's song later, but our Hebrews reading speaks of trust and confidence in the new relationship with God made possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. The psalm is one of gratitude and appreciation and in the gospel- one of Mark's more apocalyptic passages - as we are told to heed the warnings of the age, so we are also invited to listen to and (implicitly) to trust in Jesus.

A couple of East Anglian bishops from the Cof E can be found most weeks posting on Facebook talking about the lectionary readings, a kind of episcopal double act. They observed for this weekend how apt the gospel reading was – that we still live in a time of war and of rumours of wars... One suggested that this reading should prompt us to examine how we order our lives in the present; ask ourselves what are the values we hold as most dear as the basis for our own lives, both private and public, individual and corporate.

I found this really helpful, for self examination should make a difference. We can hardly call others to account if we haven't looked at our own lives and practices first. But then we might well go on to ask what values do we see in our society, the culture around us?

Are they the same or different to our own - is there any sense of disconnect? Faithfulness and trust don't seem to figure too highly right now in many spheres of public life. And what can we do in response? We live in a world where, according to Christian Aid, 1/6<sup>th</sup> of all children are growing up in places where there is conflict. We live in a country where, according to a UN report published this week, 14 million people - 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the population live below the poverty line and 1.5 million are destitute... and where, recently, an advertisement for frozen food which highlighted the destruction of virgin rainforest (to clear room for the production of palm oil) was banned because it was deemed too political - much of it originated as a Greenpeace video. I find myself struggling to understand how anything be 'too' political, if it is to do with an issue which affects the whole planet.

We are all political – we live in a society with structures and systems that are ordered in a certain way and we're participants in that. As Christians our faith informs how we think the values of God's kingdom should work out in practice though we may not always agree exactly how. But we should be thinking about and acting on it ..... which leads me back to Hannah.

As I said earlier, her words are echoed in Luke's gospel in Mary's song, the Magnificat. But whilst there are similarities in tone and content there are also significant differences in context. Mary speaks those words whilst still pregnant, unexpectedly, with the Christ child - and as a response to Elizabeth's greeting. They are spoken in anticipation as she waits for the birth.

Hannah's pregnancy only happened at all after a long wait – as the second wife in this biblical marriage she had been taunted cruelly about her infertility by wife number 1. It was only after she had vowed to God that if she had a male child she would give him into God's service as a nazirite that she fell pregnant. The words that we have heard are spoken just after she has given up Samuel, her longed for son, her only child (at that time) - just weaned, so maybe aged 3 or so (?), into the care of Eli at the temple. Words spoken after the event, but still looking forward ...

Hannah's words could have been a lament, but they're not, far from it. These are words of gratitude, determination, trust and affirmation, praise and hope and perhaps even defiance as she leaves her son behind. Like those of Miriam before her and Mary after, they are poetry: a psalm, in effect, inserted into a prose text. As a psalm, these words are intended to be corporate, not private. There's speculation that this psalm was inserted into the narrative text to illuminate and help to make connections with other texts and identify with them.

So why does this matter to us today?

The story which unfolds in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel is one in which we are invited to sense God's guidance behind all that is going on, and God's purposes driving events in a certain direction; just as, also, in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel, God is seen at work in the world in and through people of faith and humility. As Hannah gives thanks, her prayer is not for herself but for the nation in which her son Samuel will play a major role as prophet and priest, as it develops and flourishes during the reign of David.

Perhaps we need to attend to something demonstrated in this story - what Katie Munnick\* describes as 'faithful longing and the deeper work of a loving God who shapes all things'. Life may be challenging at times and the future may be uncertain, but if we can hold onto a vision of what the world, rightly and justly ordered would look like, and if we can sense that the divine is indeed at work among us, then there is always purpose and hope. So we can continue to participate together in the compassionate and transforming work of God, in small ways as well as large ones: and always in faithfulness and trust. Amen.

Sarah Colver

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<http://www.presbyterianrecord.ca/2012/11/12/hannah-and-her-sisters/>