

Reflections from The Hill – Hannah

Maybe it's just a bloke thing, but as I get older, I'm finding that I'm getting more attracted to the stories of the women in the Bible. What an extraordinary bunch of people they are: Eve, Sarah, Abigail, Rachel, Jezebel, Leah, Ruth, Naomi, Mary, Elizabeth ... the list goes on and on.

They are a mixed bunch, too, some good and some you wouldn't trust enough to turn your back on. Not so good, really. Bad, even, just like some of the blokes in the story. But the first thing that struck me about the women was to see just how God uses them for his purposes despite them being on the margins of society, unlike where the blokes are.

I'm also amazed at the numbers of childless, or barren, ones who turn up in that list. Surely, I ask myself as a bloke, surely childlessness isn't that common? Maybe it is and I haven't seen it. Typical.

Hannah's one of them but by no means the first. Even before her, we've already read about Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Samson's mother; all of them were childless yet were ones who bore significant children.

I say 'significant' because these offspring were all change agents for the people of Israel. The list is staggering: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Samson. Samuel, the son whom Hannah bore first to Elkanah (she later bore three more sons and two daughters) is one of those change agents as well who, almost single-handedly, turned the thinking of the Israelites on its ear by being the one who initiated the monarchy under Saul and that also produced the great King David.

In our passage this week we hear that it's Samuel's birth or, rather, his conception, that's remarkable because here we find God at work on the margins again, where the women of the Bible lived.

Hannah is in good company with both Sarah and Elizabeth (Mary's cousin). She too is barren, which puts her even more at the mercy of a man in that patriarchal society. Like Rachel, Hannah is also the better-loved wife. She has Elkanah's love and affection in spite of her inability to produce a child, which was, after all, her primary function and her ticket to a life of honour.

It's no wonder that Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, resented her. She was always on Hannah's case, nagging her and throwing childlessness in her face. Typically, the bloke in the story didn't help much.

For starters, Elkanah keeps lavishing extra food on Hannah's plate and clearly loved her better. What's that do to Peninnah? Without a doubt, what Elkanah did got right up her nose. But there's a displaced person here. Wasn't she suffering, too? It must be heartbreaking to feel eclipsed by a rival, in spite of being the one who's trying to do the best she can.

This theme of barrenness recurs in the Old Testament, as we heard about last week in the story of Naomi's barren but suddenly fertile future in the Book of Ruth. In that story, the barrenness/fertile change is symbolic of Israel's future.

Barrenness also points a finger toward the lack of any kind of future, whatever culture or time you're in. It's Hannah's pregnancy, then, is an amazing gift from God and is the fulfilment of the promises and a direction of hope for the future, not only for her but for all Israel.

Samuel (his name means 'God's Promise') will be the one to help Israel establish a monarchy with a strong leader so that people wouldn't just do what was right in their own eyes, but would be led and be accountable to something greater than themselves. It's a story we could all do well to learn.

That 'something greater' is nothing less than being blessed by God. It is remarkable yet entirely consistent with the biblical story that great things come from nothing; from humility, from things that are small and barren.

It reminds me of the country in Western Queensland and the way it looks to be dry and dead, yet it's actually teeming with all sorts of life and all sorts of possibilities, even before the rains come. I wonder whether that's why I'm drawn to the wilderness to refresh my spirit? God does amazing things in the most unlikely places, and through the most unlikely people.

The tale of Hannah has yet more diamonds to produce for, at the bottom of the power spectrum in this story, is a distressed and seemingly powerless woman at prayer, Hannah. Shiloh is a very important place of worship, so the priest Eli, like some I read of, must have had a heightened sense of his own importance and that keeping order was one of them.

I mean, you can't just come into a holy place, walk right past the important man at the door and be odd, or drunk, or out of order at the same time. It wouldn't do at all. We have to maintain our decorum. There is such a thing as order, after all.

But there's something deeper going on here. There's the problem, the uneasiness, of people going straight to God with their prayers – without the priest, the intermediary, being present. That may ring a bell for some of us today, especially if we think we can't speak directly to God but need a clergy person to do it for us.

The normal way of prayer in those days was by means of ritual, incense, and animal sacrifice. Then Hannah shows up, without bringing a sacrifice, without asking directions from the priest, and simply prays, soaring past all the liturgical conventions of her age, boldly presenting her petition before her God without benefit of any clergy.

She uses her own words, her own voice, without intermediaries. Later on, rabbis focussed on Hannah as a model of authentic prayer, sometimes called 'the prayer of the heart', an altogether revolutionary thing. Mercifully, many others down the ages have discovered and used this, too.

Hannah is important long after the story moves on to male prophets and kings who have much more power and receive much more attention. This scent of God's Good Girl that lingers is not just an accidental literary device but the fact of her name, which means "grace," that begins a radical change in the plan of God for His people.

He's always doing that to us, changing us, that is. Have you ever thought, for example, that none of us is the main character in the story of our own life, and that we're not being led to see God in our stories at all, as difficult as that might be to swallow? What Hannah is about (and all the others, too) is seeing our stories in God's story, an entirely different perspective.

It seems to me that we mostly search for God in particular situations or incidents. Maybe it's time for a rethink. Maybe we need to stop saying 'God is in my heart,' and start saying 'I am in God's heart.'

Quote of the Week:

Hannah has always been more than the "type" of the righteous, barren woman who ultimately conceives a child. She is never less than a mother, but always more. She is a model for what it means to live faithfully in days that seem Godforsaken. She is a model for Israel and, Christian preachers might dare to say, for the church in our time. [Ted A. Smith](#)

One-liner of the Week:

To believe in God for me is to feel that there is a God, not a dead one, or a stuffed one, but a living one, who with irresistible force urges us towards more loving. Vincent van Gogh

Humour of the Week (thanks to Jerry Zar):

I have a spelling checker

It came with my PC.

It plane lee marks four my revue

Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

A checker is a bless sing,

It freeze yew lodes of thyme.

It helps me right awl stiles two reed,

And aides me when aye rime."

And sew on.

The Moral of the story is: learn to spell.

Trust in the Love, Hope in the Future, Live in the Now.

In His Grip

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He is no fool who gives away something he cannot keep to gain something he cannot lose - Jim Elliott