

Hannah A sermon for Mothering Sunday

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God of compassion,
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself;
strengthen us in our daily living,
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal.

Our text today may be found in the first book of Samuel, chapter 1 and verse 20:

'In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son.'

Today is, as well you know, Mothers' Day in the UK, Mothering Sunday if you prefer the title given to today in the Lectionary. Of course, here in France, you have to wait till May for Mothers' Day but traditionally for the British, Mothering Sunday is the day one let one's servants have a day off to go back home to visit their parents and half way through the discipline of Lent, it was seen as a chance for refreshment and renewal.

So let me begin by asking you to name mothers in the Bible who initially were childless because they could not in the first place conceive. Well there's Hannah

obviously – you’d have to have been asleep during the reading of Old Testament not to know that one ! Then, of course, there is Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who in her 90s gave birth to their son, Isaac ! And at the start of Luke’s gospel, we have Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah, who gave birth to John the Baptist. So we have at least a hat-trick of women who were gifted with a child after they believed they could not conceive.

There are some interesting details to note about the story of Hannah and the infant Samuel. First of all, her husband Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah had children by him and Hannah, his favourite, did not. Unsurprisingly Peninnah, who must have been jealous that their husband preferred the younger woman, took her jealousy and spite out on Hannah by dissing her because she had no children. In those days, not to have had a child was a cause for shame. Secondly, Hannah is dissed by the High Priest, Eli, at Shiloh. Outside the sanctuary of the Lord, Hannah is praying a heart-felt prayer and so upset is she, so deep her passion, that her mouth moves but no words are heard. So for Eli who is sitting there and looking up at her, she must seemed either mad or drunk and Eli opts for the latter, telling her to go away and sober up ! With all due respect, Hannah tells Eli the truth of her situation and the priest has the grace to pray that her prayer may be answered. And of course it is. Thirdly, when Hannah does conceive and give birth to Samuel, she promises the boy to the Lord and when the Samuel is old enough she takes him back to Shiloh and gives him to Eli to serve the Lord in perpetuity. Oh and lastly, we should note that the Lord blesses Hannah with three further sons and two daughters !

So with the story of Hannah in mind, I would like to say thanks on behalf of all of us to our mothers, the women who have given birth to us, who have nurtured and nourished us and enabled us to have this great gift of God – to be alive.

Motherhood is a sacred vocation. That said, half of us can't, by definition, be mothers. Even if we have a sex change, men can't give birth – thank God ! Nor can all women have children. Some choose not to. Others have physiological or gynaecological reasons why they can't conceive or bring a child to term. But let us accept that, though not all of us can be mothers, being a mother is a wonderful thing. It is not without pain or heartbreak. In the Temple, the words of Simeon to Mary, the mother of Jesus, were clear enough – **'a sword shall pierce your heart.'** And my mum once wisely said that as children we can make a mother's arms ache; as adults we can make their hearts ache ! That said, only a mum can know the true wonder and joy of feeling in her arms the child she carried in her womb who is now alive and breathing – an independent, living human being like herself, flesh of her flesh and the product of her love for a man, her husband, the fruit of their marriage.

So the joy and the pain of being a mother is something we should all respect and honour not least because it forms part of the Fifth Commandment – **'Honour thy Father and thy Mother'**. Why I personally believe that Mary should be honoured is the simple fact that God became a child and grew to be a man because Jesus was conceived in her womb – that Mary carried Jesus inside her as zygote, embryo and foetus and gave birth to him in the same way all of us come into the world.

So let's honour our mothers today and remember, too, to honour Mary, the mother of God, thanking God that through them we have life and can have life in all its fullness.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 29 : Hannah

