

We all love stories. However we view them, be it an Agatha Christie either in book form or on the TV, a soap on the TV or reading War and Peace. We like stories. They draw us in as we begin to identify with the characters and as the plot carries us along and we are eager to see how the cliff-hanger will resolve itself.

The Bible is one big story and much of the Bible is made up of lots of smaller stories. Today we start a series looking at one such story that takes us through 1 Samuel. Now when I use story I am not referring to something made up rather to the account of the history of God's people which comes to us in narrative form and which is therefore a story.

1 Samuel is part of the bigger story of God's salvation plan and it begins not with 1 Sam 1:1 but with Judges 21:25, "In those days Israel had no King; everyone did as he saw fit". It is a picture of anarchy and also moral decadence. Indeed if we move on into 1 Sam 3:1 "in those days the word of the Lord was rare" we see it was also a time of godlessness. This is the cliff-hanger. How will it be resolved?

1. A woman in despair 1:1-8

It may seem an odd place to start. OK the opening words of 1 Sam are "There was a certain man" and Elkanah is mentioned but only to introduce us to one of his wives. Hannah.

Hannah, v2, had no children. It can be a stigma today and it certainly was then.

As we read in v3 year in year out they would make the journey from Ramah to the sanctuary at Shiloh to offer the appropriate sacrifices. Then when it came to portioning out the food Elkanah's other wife Peninnah would take the opportunity to wind up Hannah by pointing out her lack of children. You can almost hear the words from Peninnah, "I'm not sure why you come Hannah, what have you got to be thankful for after all you have no children!"

Rivalry is a dreadful thing and leads people to horrible actions doesn't it?

But every year it would seem Peninnah took the opportunity to stick the knife in and it clearly hurt. Elkanah did what he could to help her, though v5 is a bit of a problem and I think a better reading is the one we get in the RSV, "although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion because the Lord had closed her womb."

Elkanah did not blame her for her childlessness, he loved her but in fairness gave her only what was right. However, he could not give her what she most wanted.

So it would seem each year the event and Peninnah's words caused Hannah to break down in tears and, despite the assurance of Elkanah, v8, of his love for her, refusing to eat even the portion given to her.

As we read we can sense her distress, pain and despair. There was nothing that could be done. There was no hope. Nothing could or would change. This was how it would be always. Perhaps most of the

time she could live with it and just get on. But at this point every year with this special meal the point was rammed home in a most painful way, by Elkanah and his loving words, because sometimes when we are in pain people being nice to us can bring out the tears, by Peninnah in a very different way as she sought to get one over her rival, and in this religious setting as she perhaps wondered why has God done this to me? Doesn't God care?

It is a situation perhaps some of us can identify with. Perhaps some here this morning or listening on download are living with a situation that weighs heavily on you. It may be an issue of personal health, or a family matter, or a struggle at work, and you struggle with it but can't see a way out. It may be that at times it does literally drive you to despair and tears in the same way that Hannah wept. Perhaps you are wondering where is God in all of this.

2. A cry to God 1:9-11

It would appear that Hannah knew the root of her problem, it has been stated twice so far "the Lord closed her womb", a recognition of God's sovereignty over everything. So it was to God she took her pain and she literally poured out her pain and sadness to God, v10.

This is what one writer describes as "the logic of faith". This faith recognises that God is Lord even over the most tragic circumstances. This, however, does not lead to fatalism, I must simply accept my lot, nor resentment, I want nothing to do with such a God. Rather faith responds to God's goodness whereby believing, as we read in Romans 8:28, "and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" leads us to bring our situation to the Sovereign God in prayer. Hannah's prayer was in the form of a vow but let's not think she was bargaining with God. She came to the Lord almighty, v11, in humility as a servant and simply asked for that which she most desired, a son. Yes she offered him back to God as indeed we should offer every child to God in prayer for God's service but the point here is that in her deepest despair and need it was to God that she came in prayer.

In this Hannah stands an example and teacher to us all. Are we weak and heavy laden? Well you finish the sentence – take it to the Lord in prayer. That may seem a trite thing to say but it is real, Hannah thought so, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane thought so, Paul with his thorn in the flesh as we saw a few weeks back thought so.

This is prayer pouring out our hearts to God. It reminds me of a story from a church in the USA where a notice in the church said, "Prayers have to be notified on the correct form or they will not be processed."

There was nothing of that here just a cry to God for help.

Are we weak and heavy laden then it is to God we should come in prayer and pour out the pains of our heart. Jesus encourages us to do this “Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

Will you do that you who are feeling the pains of life, you who look ahead and can see no relief no way the situation can be changed and who fear that you will not be able to stand under the burden of pain?

3. A priestly blessing 1:12-17

While all this had been going on Eli, the priest at the sanctuary, had been watching but clearly not understanding what was going on. He could see her lips moving but could not hear any words and his presumption was that she was drunk and he didn't like it one little bit. He berated her v14 telling her to give up the booze. Clearly not street pastor material!

Hannah explained the truth of the situation, v16 “I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief”. That sums it up doesn't and again highlights the main thread of this story.

In response Eli pronounces a kind of blessing v17, “Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him”. I have to say it sounds a bit Reverend Timmsish in Postman Pat when he says “Go in peace Pat!”

In saying what he did Eli was endorsing a prayer that would ultimately do him out of a job.

4. Answered prayer 1:18-20

The change seems have been immediate in Hannah in that, v18, she ate something and “her face was no longer downcast”. Something had changed in Hannah it would seem that the words of 1 Peter 5:6-7 were being worked out in her, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

That was what Hannah had done she had cast her anxiety of God and she had been lifted up irrespective of whether God granted her a child!

I would think that some here would bear testimony to what Hannah found in that when we come to God and pour out our pains and anxieties we do feel at the end better and lighter and I don't think that is just some kind of psychology but a real recognition that the Almighty God does care for us and that by his Spirit he can bring comfort to us in our trials and strength to us in our weakness, even if the trouble is not taken away.

However, in the case of Hannah the answer is more than a changed demeanour for as we read in v19 “the Lord remembered her” that is God answered positively her prayer and v20, “So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel saying, ‘Because I asked the Lord for him’”.

God heard her cry and God gave her the child she so desperately wanted – praise God.

What she could not do and what Elkanah could not do God did for her. As one writer points out, "God's tendency is to make our total inability his starting point. Our utter incapacity is often the prop he delights to use for his next act".

As ever we need to recognise that God does not always give us what we ask for. Earlier I mentioned Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and Paul's prayer for his thorn in the flesh to be taken away. In both those instances God the Father's answer was no. However as Paul points out the real answer was "my strength is made perfect in weakness" as was evidenced in Jesus' death on the cross and Paul's continued ministry.

Here the answer of God was positive and Hannah was blessed with Samuel.

It is a great story but in seeing it as we have we haven't really seen the half of it. For this is about more than one needy woman having her need met by God.

What we are seeing here is another episode in the bigger story of salvation and here we see God acting to provide for his people a spiritual leader to guide the people of God.

We began by noting the words from Judges "In those days there was no king". There was a need of leadership and 1 Samuel is about how God filled that vacuum with Samuel and through him, as we shall see in a couple of weeks with a king firstly Saul and then David.

But here we need to go back to v1 to see a key point. As we read v1 we may think I know nothing of these people and these places and in one sense that is the point. They were ordinary, they were nobodies but from them came a great leader of God's people. God acted through these ordinary people and through this childless woman to provide a leader for his people. Later he would take not a woman who could not have children but a virgin, Mary, and through her provide the true King and rescuer that people needed even Jesus Christ. Samuel and Jesus came from ordinary people.

However, this story is important because of the child to be born. From the middle of the next chapter we don't hear of either Elkanah or Hannah again in this story. It is Samuel who is important because he is the one whom God will use to lead his people and eventually as we shall see to be the link between the Judges and the Kings.

But that is for later. What we see here is a woman in deep distress pouring her heart out to God and God in his grace mercy and power positively answering her prayer and the encouragement to us as similar ordinary people to cry out to God knowing he will hear us.

Are you weak and heavy laden? Are you burdened with a load of care? Then we have the privilege to come and bring that before our heavenly Father knowing that he cares for us. Will you do that, perhaps in the quietness at the end of this sermon whether you are here in Christ Church or listening elsewhere? Or it may be that you want to go to those doing prayer ministry at the end of the service

and pray with them. We don't have to carry our burden alone. We can pour it out to God he cares for us.