

Mothering Sunday, 30th March 2025
1 Samuel 1:20-end; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; John 19:25b-27

Today is Mothering Sunday, which in the church year, is always celebrated the week before Passion Sunday when we begin to focus especially on Jesus' suffering and death. Let's today reflect on relationships between parents and children in the light of God's grace, and our life within the church. I want us to think both about our earthly families and the family of the church, looking at the Old Testament reading and our gospel reading.

Let's first turn to our Old Testament reading.

The passage we heard from 1 Samuel is one part of the story of Hannah, the barren woman whom God makes fruitful; she gives birth to Samuel who will be a great prophet within Israel. Let's fill in some background to what we heard this morning. Hannah is one of Elkanah's two wives. His other wife, Penninah, has several children, but Hannah has none. This is a source of deep shame and suffering for Hannah, despite the fact her husband loves her. We need to realise that being a barren woman unable to have children was a much bigger issue in Hannah's time than it is in our day, at least in the West. Hannah is taunted by Penninah and she would have been regarded as socially inferior by the wider community. She particularly feels this at the time of the annual sacrifice at Shiloh; Hannah's grief and shame leads her to weep and refuse to eat. Weeping and loss of appetite; we might today say she was depressed. Perhaps there are some of us here who have yearned to have children and who might identify with Hannah's feelings.

In her grief and bitterness, Hannah pours out her heart to the Lord, and prays for a male child, who she promises she will then dedicate to the Lord for the rest of his life. The priest Eli who sees her desperately praying before the Lord encourages her to go in peace and trust that God will grant her request. And God hears Hannah's prayer; she conceives a son and when he is born she calls him 'Samuel', meaning God has heard her request.

What will Hannah do now? Samuel must have been Hannah's deepest treasure, the source of her joy. After all that desperate longing for a child, here he is. He is a miracle. We would understand it if Hannah became over protective, kept her child close and never let him out of her sight, holding this precious gift tightly and fiercely to her heart. But Hannah is faithful to the vow she made to God. She tells her husband Elkanah, that when the child is weaned she will take him to the Lord and she will offer him as a nazirite. Nazirites did not drink wine or shave their heads and were set apart to serve God. Elkanah who, as her husband, had the power of veto over his wife's decisions, supports her in this: 'Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only – may the Lord establish his word.'

So, in due course, Hannah brings the young Samuel to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and presents him to Eli saying: 'I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.'

In the following chapter of the book of Samuel, we hear of Hannah's song of praise to God; to the God who answered her prayer and brought fruitfulness out of barrenness. Despite her joy in the gift of her son, Hannah's focus is on the Giver rather than the gift, and she turns her heart and mind in praise to God. And as we continue to read the books of Samuel, we see that

Hannah's story is part of the bigger purposes of God; God is at work and he will bring much fruit from Samuel's life for the wider community of Israel.

So how does this story speak to us?

It reminds us that God is the Giver of all good gifts, even those people who are dearest to us. It's very easy for those of us who are parents to be possessive over our children, to bind them to us, and to think of them as belonging to us. Our children can even become idols, the focus of our time, our energy, our money, our hopes and plans for the future. But in the deepest sense, our children are not 'ours'; they belong to God.

Hannah gave Samuel back to God, when he was still a very young child, to learn to serve in the house of God with Eli, and it seems she then saw him only once a year at the yearly sacrifice. This may seem very far from our own experience. Nevertheless, we can all reflect on our attitude to our children, whatever age they are: can we trust them to God? Can we trust that God will work his purposes out in their lives? The same is true for *all* our close relationships. Can we offer all those closest to us to God and pray not just for what we might want for them but for God's gracious purposes to bear fruit in their lives? This is a big challenge (at least I find it so) and it is not something we do just once in our lives; we need to continually offer back to God those dearest to us and pray for his will to be done in their lives.

Let's now turn to our gospel reading; this very short scene at the cross, where together with the beloved disciple and a few others, Mary, the mother of Jesus, watches her son die. But here, the God who brought life and fruitfulness out of Hannah's barrenness also brings life and fruitfulness from the seeming barrenness of Jesus' agonised death on the cross.

In a few sparse words, the dying Jesus brings together his mother and the Beloved Disciple. We might think this is simply Jesus showing a touching concern for his mother during his last few moments of his life. However, most commentators point out that something deeper is going on in this scene.

It is striking to note that Jesus addresses his mother as 'woman'. This was not an impolite term (it was rather like 'madam' or 'lady'), but it was certainly an unusual way to address one's mother. The only other scene in which the mother of Jesus appears in John's gospel is in the story of the wedding at Cana, told in John chapter 2. In both these two scenes she is unnamed, and, in both cases, Jesus addresses her as 'woman'. In both scenes there is also mention of the 'hour', which in John's gospel is frequently used to describe the hour of Jesus' suffering and glorification. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus tells his mother that 'my hour has not yet come', now, on the cross his hour is here.

At this crucial hour, the moment of his suffering and paradoxical glorification on the cross, Jesus brings his mother and the Beloved Disciple together. He addresses his mother: 'Woman, here is your son. Then he speaks to the beloved disciple, 'Here is your mother.' There is a kind of ritual solemnity in these simple words. There is something important going on here. The clue to understanding this scene is that immediately after the passage we heard this morning, we are told: 'after this...Jesus knew that all was now finished' or all was 'now accomplished'. This last scene, bringing his mother and the Beloved Disciple together, has accomplished something significant, and Jesus, a few moments later declares 'it is finished' and dies.

So, in what sense is Jesus bringing his mother and Beloved Disciple together at his hour of suffering and glorification an important part of what his death accomplishes? Many commentators on this scene speak of a new family, a new community being born at this hour. The mother of Jesus who in some senses is the model disciple in her obedience to God's will, and the Beloved Disciple who also functions as a model disciple in the gospel of John are brought together. At the very moment of Jesus' death, something new is happening. As one writer puts it: 'At the hour of his passion a new family begins; a home which is indeed home for the whole family of God.' Jesus' work is finished and the new community is born. Jesus' death on Calvary and his subsequent resurrection leads to a new fruitfulness, a new beginning, and this is not just in the lives of individual believers, but in the beginning of a new community.

The Christian family is centred on the cross. It is at the foot of the cross that the mother of Jesus, and the Beloved Disciple, one man and one woman, are brought together. It is at the foot of the cross that we are brought together as the family of the church, whoever we are.

As we think about our earthly families today, and our mothers and fathers and our children, we should also remember our Christian family, the family of the church, brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection. Early in his ministry, when he is told his mother and his brothers are waiting for him, Jesus answers: 'who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him, he said: "Here are my mother and my brother! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."' (Mark 3: 33-35). We become members of Jesus' family through relationship to him and obedience to him; in Jesus we are drawn together.

We are joined to one another through the cross of Christ. One of the things Jesus' death accomplished was the beginning of this new community of faith. Let us not take one another in our Christian family for granted, but humbly give thanks for our place within it, praising God for this new community. Let us never forget it is the cross of Christ which makes the Christian family possible; and it is through the cross of Christ that our peace, our healing, and our flourishing are to be found. Whenever there are tensions or disagreements within the church, we need to go back to the cross.

Today, in a few moments, there will be opportunity for anointing with oil (in the sign of the cross) and prayer for hope and healing. There may be various areas of our lives in which we need healing, but perhaps today we might especially want to pray for healing in our relationships within our families, and healing for any hurt or divisions within the family of the church.

We trust in a God who can bring fruitfulness out of barrenness, new beginnings out of dead ends. Our God is the Giver, the source of all good gifts, whether in our earthly families or the family of the church. Let us trust our loved ones, our children, our spouses, our parents, to God, rather than clinging on to them; trusting also in God's good purposes for them. And let us also give thanks for the family of the church and our place within it. As we approach Passiontide and Good Friday, may we learn more and more what it means to be drawn together as God's people through the cross of Christ, and trust ourselves and one other to the God who brings life out of death.