

CHANGE IS COMING¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 November 2018

This morning's reading from the start of 1 Samuel, is a highly crafted and nuanced account of the birth of an important child, Samuel. It centres around the plight of Hannah, the first, but childless, wife of Elkanah. Because of Hannah's lack of children, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah. Children were an absolute requirement of a marriage, both for economic and personal reasons. Children, particularly boys, but also girls, were an essential labour force. The boys guaranteed the continuation of the family line and the girls were married off in significant inter-family liaisons. These facts highlighted the ambiguous positions of both wives. Hannah was first but less useful. Peninnah was second but more useful and made good use of that usefulness to dominate Hannah.

Yet Elkinah loved Hannah, implying that Penninah was a wife of convenience. When they went to the annual sacrificial festival at Shiloh, the family shared the leftover meat from the sacrificial animal. Elkinah showed his preference for Hannah by giving her a double share. Yet Hannah is not satisfied with this preference, she wants a proper status as a fruitful wife. She prays silently in the shrine, probably a tent, the temple in Jerusalem not having yet been built. It was not customary to pray silently and the priest, Eli, thinks her drunk. Hannah subsequently has the child she so devoutly desired. This child she dedicates to God.

The Hebrew scriptures have a number of accounts of births to women who were childless. The most significant of these is Sarah, the wife of Abraham² and mother of Isaac. But the accounts also include Rebekah, the wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob³, Rachel, the wife of Jacob, and the mother of Joseph⁴, and the unnamed mother of Samson.⁵ The Gospel of Luke contains a similar account of the birth of John the Baptist to his mother, Elizabeth.⁶ All these accounts mark the children who were born as significant in the history of the faith. None of the readers of the account of the birth of Samuel could have missed the significance of this story. Neither could the readers of Luke's gospel.

When we look back, we can also see the similarity of the song of Hannah, which we had in place of our psalm this morning, to the Magnificat spoken by Mary when she went to visit Elizabeth.⁷ Although Mary was not infertile, the birth of Jesus partakes of the significance indicated by these other stories. Whatever the factual truth of the accounts, the records exist to show that change is on its way. Something important is to happen. In the case of Samuel, the change is from a tribal society to a monarchic nation. Samuel is to choose the first two kings, Saul and David.

Hannah's pilgrimage to the place of sacrifice and the coming of her important son together bring us to this morning's gospel. In the progress of Mark's gospel, we have come close to the concluding events of the Passion. The next chapter, Chapter 14, begins the account of Holy

¹ Readings: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; The Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-8); Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-11

² Genesis 17:16-19

³ Genesis 25:21-26

⁴ Genesis 29:31, 30:22-24

⁵ Judges 13:2-5

⁶ Luke 1:5-17

⁷ Luke 1:46-55. Scholars suggest that the song of Hannah is the model for the Magnificat.

Week. Chapter 13 is a long discussion warning the disciples of the meaning of what is about to happen.

Jesus has been teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem and, as they come out, one of his disciples is amazed by the building. Jesus debunks his amazement by referring to its essential, yet unseen, instability. Remember too, that the first readers of this gospel after 70AD knew that it had been cast down by the Romans, so the words of Jesus had some real impact for them. Many might have thought that Jesus had predicted this downfall, which is probably not the case. On the contrary, he was making a much more general and more important statement, as we shall see. Later, some disciples ask Jesus about his comment and the possible end of all things. It is important to note here that the link between the possible destruction of the Temple and the end of all things, the judgement of God, was made, not by Jesus but, by the disciples. It is they who are afraid as they try to interpret the events of the world. Jesus is not afraid.

As Robert Hamerton-Kelly notes:

It is remarkable that among all the apocalyptic imagery of this discourse there is not one claim that the tribulations to befall humanity in the messianic apocalyptic history and the ultimate eschaton are expressions of the vengeance of God. Rather, the suffering is to be caused by wars, frauds, charlatans, natural catastrophes, misunderstandings and persecutions. These are the sadly predictable human failings that cause human misery without any divine intervention.⁸

To understand the response that Jesus makes we must first look at the Temple as it actually was. We might think of it as simply a grand religious building, like a cathedral. But its actual purpose was to make violence sacred. The Temple was a very high-class slaughter house where large quantities of animals of different kinds were killed every day to satisfy what was believed to be God's demand for death in payment for sins. Whilst we don't make such animal sacrifices, we do want to keep violence sacred, for example, deaths on battlefields; being tough on asylum seekers. These kinds of violence are elevated by being co-opted into a sacred purpose of one kind or another: national survival or national self-control.

Jesus debunks this attempt to say that God, or any higher sacred purpose, requires violence. He gives no value either to the building as it stands or to its destruction. Standing or fallen, this attempt to sacralise violence has no meaning.

It is clear from all this that Jesus is not prophesying that God's violence towards us will bring all things to an end. On the contrary, he warns his disciples about accepting this kind of argument. Catastrophes will happen, Jesus knows. We should not, however, give them any theological value.⁹

The danger is that those who do give theological value to what they imagine to be God's violence are destined to follow in that course. Such beliefs encourage us to be violent in turn. This is not the way of Jesus. As James Alison says:

The [disciples must not] allow themselves to be lured or seduced [or] to be pulled by their desire into the world which others will want to create. ... Wars and rumours of wars have no sacred meaning at all, and the one who is looking at what happens through Jesus' eyes will not be frightened of these things, not driven by them in any way. For they are merely the signs of the

⁸ Robert G Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 194, p. 40

⁹ James Alison, *Raising Abel*, New York, Crossroad, 2002, pp. 145-149

collapsing world maintained and reinforced by sacralised violence, and that collapse is itself a sign that something very different is coming to birth.¹⁰

Over the last few weeks, we have seen the astounding, self-defeating and futile intervention of agencies of our diocese in the debate over religious freedom. In this intervention, they were seduced in precisely the way we are warned against in this morning's gospel.

Our reading from 1 Samuel centred around the violence implicit in the oppression of the childless Hannah by her surrounding society, regardless of the love that her husband showed her. That reading also highlights the violence implicit in using Penninah as a child bearer. The violence implicit in the recent intervention was that, whilst being employed by, or studying in, those institutions, a group of people were nevertheless to know that their being and lives were not acceptable, were specially broken and sinful. I cannot fail to note that the overarching theology of the diocese is that God intends violence as the means of our salvation. Such a theology itself leads to violence.

We must acknowledge that violence was involved in our salvation but that violence was not God's. Violence cannot be regarded as sacred.

James Alison says, at the end of his consideration of Chapter 13 of Mark's gospel:

The staggering thing that this means ... is this: God likes us. All of us. God likes me and I like being liked. It has nothing to do with whether we are bad or good. ... In teaching after teaching [Jesus] makes the same point: all are invited, bad and good. ...

Behind the word 'like' there is an astonishing gentleness ... not dependent at all on needing to rescue us. ... The word *like* in all its gentleness is the word appropriate for the extraordinarily unbothered, non-emergency power we mean by creation. ... A power so gentle and so huge that we are able not to be afraid.¹¹

¹⁰ James Alison, *On Being Liked*, New York, Crossroad, 2003, p. 10

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 15