

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 27th December 2015 11am

Revd Val Reid

1 Samuel 2: 18-20, 26

Colossians 3: 12-17

Luke 2: 41-52

This was the year in which our whole attitude to refugees was transformed by a photo.

A photo of a little boy, drowned, washed up on a beach in Turkey.

Somehow that image made us acutely aware of our common humanity.

No longer a swarm.

But this family.

This lost son.

This grieving father.

The Bible also does a good line in photo-journalism.

Or rather, in painting little word pictures which lodge in the mind, and transform our thinking.

In these few verses from the first book of Samuel, we have a vivid glimpse of just what Hannah's grand gesture of sacrifice really meant.

You will probably remember, from our lectionary reading a few weeks back, that Hannah was unable to have children.

We follow her story as she prays at the shrine at Shiloh.

Prays so angrily and so passionately that Eli, the priest, thinks she is drunk.

When she explains, and he apologises, she is sent home with a blessing.

And when her miraculous son is born she decides to dedicate him to God.

To spend his life as a Nazirite.

A priest in the shrine where her prayer was answered.

And this is what her promise looks like.

Each year she goes up to Shiloh to make the ritual sacrifice, and to visit her son.

Each year she takes him a little robe.

Presumably, each year she guesses how much he will have grown, and makes a robe that she thinks will fit him.

And then each year, the writer tells us, she returns home.

Leaving her boy behind.

It's a poignant little story.

But it's also a story that raises some questions for me.

I wonder how Hannah felt as she turned for home each year?

And I wonder how Samuel felt as he saw his mother disappear?

Is it part of that same sequence of stories which remind us that commitment to God is absolute?
If God asks you to sacrifice your much-loved, only son; then you do it.
Without question.
It's a test of obedience.
After all, God himself did not withhold his only son...

These stories always challenge me.
Is that really what God requires of us?
Mindless obedience?

Or is it what we human beings, with our habits of magical thinking, imagine that God requires.
After all, we are not told that God asked for Samuel to be left at Shiloh.
It is Hannah who decides to offer her child to God.

Why?

Was it in the hope of more children?

Verse 21, which the lectionary leaves out, tells us that following Eli's annual blessing, she had three more sons and two daughters.

Did she think that by giving up this first son, the one she wanted so much, that God owed her?

That she deserved a clutch of further children?

A comfortable life?

The respect of her community?

I wonder how often we think that God can be manipulated in this way?

That if we do this one thing – give up this one thing – behave in this one, difficult way – then everything will be all right.

We will have earned God's blessing.

We will be OK.

David Cameron, in his Christmas message this year, talked about the importance of security.

If there is one thing people want at Christmas, it's the security of having their family around them and a home that is safe.

As the floods overwhelm Yorkshire, Cumbria and parts of Lancashire over Christmas, that seems an ironic wish.

And as we have seen this year, the need for 'security' has also been used to justify policies which have made life hard for those who do not have their family around them, or a home that is safe.

Immigration policies.

Welfare policies.

Electronic surveillance policies.

Perhaps we do all long for security.

Whatever that means to each of us.

But what are the consequences for our lives?

And for the lives of others?

For Hannah, security means enough children to justify her role in a patriarchal society as a good wife and mother.

For Mary and Joseph, security means a son who does what he is told, accompanies them to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, returns home afterwards like a good boy.

After the scandal of his birth, the trauma of being refugees in Egypt, I imagine they wanted a life which was as inconspicuous as possible.

They wanted to fulfil all the requirements of their community and their faith tradition.

They wanted to keep their heads well below the parapet.

But neither of these boys – the boy Samuel and the boy Jesus – are very good at keeping a low profile.

Whatever the motivations and the expectations of their parents, whatever the pressures of the context in which they grow up, they are both deeply in touch with their own selves.

And with their God.

They are quirky, different, odd.

They don't conform.

As so often, the Lectionary leaves out verses it thinks congregations will find difficult.

or that ministers will struggle to preach about!

So in our story about the boy Samuel, the Lectionary omits verses 21-25.

That's where we learn about Hannah's replacement children.

And also where we learn about Eli's other children.

His biological sons.

They should have grown up to serve the Lord at the shrine of Shiloh.

To continue the family tradition of being priests.

But they were scoundrels, the writer tells us.

They helped themselves to all the best meat from the sacrifices.

They preferred their meat roasted rather than boiled, so they stole it from the sacrificial pots of water with a three-pronged fork.

This seems a rather specific sin, but God clearly took a dim view of it.

Far, far worse than their foodie preference for certain cooking methods, they also raped the young women who came to serve at the shrine.

No respect for tradition.

No respect for fellow humans.

No respect for God.

And their father, Eli, tells them straight that God won't stand for it.

They are cursed.

But, like young men the world over, from ancient Israel to contemporary London, the sons – we are told – did not listen to the voice of their father.

It is in this context that Samuel grows up.

And grows up to copy not the wild and selfish actions of his mentor Eli's sons, who should have been his role models, but to listen for the elusive voice of God in the quiet of the night.

The one story we have from the boyhood of Jesus comes from Luke's gospel.
Here too Jesus is not listening to the voice of his parents.
He is listening to some other voice.

We have this odd little story illustrated in the stained glass windows here at Hinde Street.
In the temple an adolescent Jesus stands pontificating.
The teachers are sitting around, amazed and admiring.
Their books and scrolls scattered on the floor, as this teenager's wisdom confounds their traditional understanding.

I find it interesting that, when it comes to the childhood of Jesus, this story, and only this story, has been retained in our canon of Scripture.
There are plenty of other stories out there.

If you read the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for example, you'll find not only a version of this story, but also many others.
You'll find Jesus amusing himself as a five-year-old making clay birds on the Sabbath, and getting into trouble with the strictly observant Jews of the village.
His response is to clap his hands, so that the clay sparrows come to life and fly away.

You'll find him striking dead the playmates who criticise him.
You'll find him killing off the teachers who are irritated that he knows more than they do about the Hebrew alphabet.
You'll find him raising to life a boy who fell from a roof, just to prove that it wasn't him who pushed him off.

I can understand why the Council of Carthage didn't include these stories in their canon of Scripture!
And I can understand why Luke's story was included.
Because our stained glass windows don't quite tell the story as Luke tells it.
Here, Jesus is telling the teachers what to think.
In Luke's gospel story, Jesus is sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.
Not laying down the law, but wanting to learn.
Wanting to learn about God.
About the stories of his faith community.
About the ways in which God is understood.

But the stories – both from the un-canonical gospel of Thomas, and the canonical gospel of Luke – make me think.
They make me think about how we come to decide who we are.
How we learn to distinguish an appropriate use of the power we have.
How we discern our vocation.
How we decide which voices to listen to.
How we grow into being ourselves.

When Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the Temple, they ask him why he has caused them such anxiety.

His answer is fascinating.

It's usually translated *Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*

Or ... *Did you not know that I must be about my father's business?*

But the Greek is much odder.

There is no noun for *house* or *business* in the sentence.

No noun at all.

A literal translation would be:

Did you not know

that in those of my Father

it behoves to be me?

It behoves to be me.

It's who I am.

This is what I am like.

In our Christmas carols we are tempted to see Jesus through rose-tinted spectacles:

And, through all His wondrous childhood,

He would honour and obey,

Love and watch the lowly maiden,

In whose gentle arms He lay:

Christian children all must be

Mild, obedient, good as He.

On this first Sunday after Christmas, I think we are asked to move on from that naivety.

I wonder if Jesus was really that perfect.

It is usually through our mistakes that we learn who we are, and who we are not.

Part of me likes to think that the boy Jesus made quite a few mistakes as he learned who he was.

Who he was called to be.

Even as an adult, there were times when the voices of outsiders made him stop.

And think.

And change.

For me, part of the subversive power of the incarnation is that God shared our imperfect nature.

Really knew what it was like to be a human being.

With all our faults.

I wonder if that was why he had such sympathy for the people he met who had made a mess of their lives.

Why he told parables like the prodigal son.

I wonder whether he would have tried to understand Eli's sons, instead of criticising and cursing and condemning them.

I wonder if they might have been capable of change.

For each one of us, faith is about growth.

Growing into who we are.

Who we are called to be.

- Not simply accepting the assumptions of our parents or our mentors.
But not simply rebelling against them either.
- It's about looking around at the context in which we grow, and deciding whether or not it is a helpful model for us.
- It's about listening to the voices of our parents, our community, our role models, and deciding whether to conform or to challenge.
- It's about making mistakes, and recognising that they are not of God.
That they do not come from our best selves.
- It is about looking deep inside ourselves to find what *behoves to be me*.
- It's about practicing the habits that will help us change.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul asks his readers to:

*Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.
And above all, clothe yourselves with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

Each year, Hannah made a slightly bigger robe for her son.

How do we clothe ourselves with the qualities that make for a holy life?

And how do we make sure there is room for growth?

For each one of us the journey will be different.

The voices will be different.

The mistakes will be different.

The hidden self will be different.

But we are all alike in our need to practice being the people God calls us to be.

How are we going to do that well, as we begin 2016?