
Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD... She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD... She made this vow: 'O LORD of hosts...' Hannah was praying silently... Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to Him.' In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the LORD.' From 1 Samuel 1

The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvellous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Have you ever felt like at times people weren't really listening to you, or what you were trying to say was being misunderstood? We all have felt that like at some time. But there are times in lives when perhaps we feel like we are not being 'listened to', and it gets to our heart. A story is told of some young prostitutes during interviews in a San Francisco study who were asked: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" Their response preceded by sadness and tears was unanimous: "What I needed most was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me."

Nine years ago the then Federal Government announced a Royal Commission into child abuse within various institutions within society. At the heart of this was that there are many people who 'silently suffer in pain', and their voice is not heard. These are not only people of abuse, but people who have faced difficult circumstances in family in life; people struggling with addictions; people unsure about their future; and many other in all sorts of situations. There are times also when I am sure that you have felt your voice was not heard... So, how could we respond...?

In our First Reading for today, Hannah struggled for her voice to be heard. She was part of a polygamous marriage (not part of God's original plan for His people). She experienced verbal abuse and harassment from her 'co-wife'. Hannah 'coped it' from many directions. And so she went to Shiloh. She went there to pray to God. She went there to be 'listened' to'. There are a number of things important in this story.

First, Shiloh was the place where the "whole congregation of Israel assembled." (Josh.18:1). Shiloh was the place where the Ark of Covenant was prior to David bringing it to Jerusalem. Shiloh also became a bone of contention when the

eastern tribes—Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh—built their own worship centre (Josh.28:22). Interestingly, also, when a war between the tribe of Benjamin and other Israelite tribes left the Benjaminites without an adequate number of women, Shiloh presented a bizarre solution. As part of the peace settlement, the leaders of the other tribes gave the Benjaminites permission to kidnap wives for themselves during a religious celebration as the young women came from Shiloh's shrine to dance in the nearby vineyards (Judg.21). Maybe this also says something of Hannah's situation.

Second, even though Hannah came as a wife, she came without security and status. Those who had 'status' were virgins or wives who had children. Many would have seen Hannah somehow 'cursed' by God as she had not borne a child (and even Hannah thought that herself in a way: 1 Sam.1:11a). Hannah was on 'the fringe'...

Third, as Hannah prayed she did so in a way not common at the time – she did not speak aloud. In those times (and even very recently, up to 200 years ago or so) whenever anyone read a book or anything, they would read aloud. To do so (read/ pray) in silence in some cultures was even seen as demonic! But Hannah's pain was so great she struggled to express her prayers (cf. Rom 8:26: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."). But at this point Eli accused her of being drunk.

And in our Reading for today, Hannah – whose 'voice was not heard' – took her prayer to God, "the LORD of hosts". The title "LORD of hosts" is used over 200 times in the Old Testament, and it emphasises God's ultimate power. However, it says several things about the nature of God. The word "host" has multiple meanings. Look in a dictionary and you'll find many definitions for it. The Latin root word can be *hospes* (where we get "hospitality") which is someone who invites in and cares for (like the host of a party, thus, "the LORD of many"). The Latin *hostis* (where we get the term hostile) refers to a "stranger" or "enemy" (thus, "God is the conqueror of many enemies"). Both of these meanings are used in the Old Testament. But we can push this even further. The Latin *hostia* means "victim", and while this last translation is not the original, literal meaning of Old Testament 'LORD of hosts', it is a beautiful insight into the prophecies uttered thousands of years ago regarding Jesus. Jesus is the One who is in charge of heaven, Jesus is the One who has won victory over sin and death and the devil; **and** Jesus is the One who is the 'victim' and 'sacrifice' for us all. No one stands before God, except by His power, mercy and grace. We can only approach Him out of His love for us, out of Christ's sacrifice for us and out of the boldness and advocacy of the Spirit in us (Heb. 4; 10). The writer to the Hebrews says this (Heb.10:19-22): "Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith."

Hannah took her prayer to God. In the face of rejection and 'looking down on her' by many others, Hannah prayed to God. She saw God as the one who listens. And when her child is born, she names him 'Samuel', which means 'heard by God'.

What does this practically mean for us? First, nowhere in Scripture, does God ask you to prove your faith. You are not asked to do some heroic act or enormous task for God to hear and answer prayer. Contrary to popular belief, faith is not measured by how great of an act you perform: faith is measured by your understanding of how great God is. His 'greatness' is seen in Jesus (and the cross of Jesus!!)...

Second, Hannah serves as an example of prayer, but not as some sort of 'saint of prayer'. Hannah is actually an example of 'real prayer'. Samuel says of his mother's prayer (1 Sam. 1:10): "*Though she was resentful (bitter), she prayed to the Lord*" Hannah brought her 'bitterness' to God... You can even take your bitterness (even your sin!) to God in prayer...

Third, Hannah reminds us that worship assists growing prayer-life... Hannah brought her prayer to God in the Tabernacle. We know that Jesus is our sanctuary (our true 'place' of prayer), and thus we can pray anytime and anywhere (as we can also open 'the Word', the Bible, and listen to Him). But our prayer life will also 'grow' as we gather together in worship in the presence of the Lord.

Four, it is in 'letting go' that 'peace is found. Once Hannah surrendered her desires (as well as her sin!) to the Lord, peace was evident in her life. ...*if You will look at my misery/bitterness... (v.11)... then the woman went away and ate and she was no longer sad... (v.18)*. It is in 'letting go' that 'peace is found. God does not reign where chaos reigns, and where chaos reigns, God does not. If you are not feeling peace in your home, in your life, in your marriage...take your concerns to the Lord.

Finally, whilst there are many people who have either never had anyone pray with them or for them (or they have struggled to utter prayer themselves...); and whilst many people who have not known the true purpose and joy of prayer (who may feel their 'voice is unheard'): God promises to hear the prayer of the heart. On the cross Jesus prayed, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me...?" Hannah's prayer in anguish was heard. Our prayers for help (even in the darkest of times) are answered in Jesus.

There are people who feel their 'voice goes unheard'. And, sadly, many who are meant to care and pray for 'the little ones' have hurt and betrayed such people. There are those who have experienced great abuse at those who claimed to confess Jesus, and in their prayers for suffering to stop wondered if God cares and is real (because of the suffering inflicted by those who professed to know God's name). However, our refuge is not to be fallen people, but Jesus of the cross.

When Samuel was born, he joined a long line of key leaders in Israel who were miraculously born to barren mothers. Abraham's wife Sarah was barren before she bore Isaac. Isaac's wife Rebecca was barren before she bore Jacob. Jacob's wife Rachel was barren before she bore Joseph. And now Elkanah's wife Hannah was barren before she gave birth to Samuel. The Lord Almighty – the Lord of Hosts – heard the prayer of a poor, barren, powerless woman, and brought forth a mighty prophet into the world at just the right time.

You see God's plan is so much bigger than you or me. He includes us in his plans, but understand that God is building a kingdom. And God is working to fulfill his purposes even in the seemingly insignificant and sometimes painful details of our lives. Often it is those painful things in life that drive us to prayer, through which God will fulfill his greater purposes.

Hannah came into the presence of God in boldness. She also came in humility of faith: she was 'humbled' by her difficult circumstances, but she had a faith in the Lord. She struggled to 'get words out', but God heard the prayer of her heart. At times, you may 'struggle to get words out, but God promises to hear the prayers of your heart. The great gift you have in the cross of Jesus is the confidence that God hears and answers prayer. Wherever you are, and whatever circumstances you may have to deal with, you can meditate on the cross of Jesus.

Hannah pictures the great reversal that God would accomplish for the whole world. Hannah represents Elizabeth and Mary in the New Testament. What is amazing is that Hannah's prayer mirrors Mary's prayer in Luke 1:46-55! When Mary learns that she is going to have a child who is the Son of God and that barren Elizabeth is going to have a child that leaps for joy when he heard Mary's voice, Mary also sings a prayer about how God reverses the condition of the lowly. Hannah's birth of Samuel and what Samuel will do is foreshadowing Mary and the birth of Jesus and what Jesus will do for the world. The book of 1 Samuel is a book of reversals. The whole of scriptures is a book of reversals.

When life is hard, we can often ask: Does God care? Does God care about us? Did God care about Hannah? God cared about Hannah because we see that He brought her low so that He changed her, elevated her, and reversed her condition for His glory. God cares for you too. He has brought you low so that you will depend on Him, who in due time will elevate you and reverse your condition. Paul says that he will rejoice in his weaknesses because he is being made strong by God in this process. Jesus said, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). Take your difficulties to the Lord in prayer knowing that He listens. We know He listens as we look to the cross of Jesus. Amen.