**The birth of Samuel**  16/1/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 1, Luke 1:1-25

Text: 1Samuel 1:1-20

Psalms: 62:5-12, 42:1-5, 127, 134a

Not long ago we reading through the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In doing so, we read the song of Mary or Magnificat as it is called: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord’ (Luke 1:46). This song has a lot in common with that of another woman giving birth to special child, namely the song or prayer of Hannah. Mary’s child was of course, super special as the only begotten Son of God, but Hannah’s son was a wonderful answer to prayer, and also special as a Nazirite and prophet of God. In fact, Hannah’s situation was more like that of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, who was old and without children when she gave birth to John the Baptist, the last of the OT prophets.

Samuel was the first of the prophets to serve God under a king in Israel. Samuel was instrumental in establishing the monarchy in Israel. Since the time the nation was established under the leadership of Moses, God was regarded as their king- it was a theocracy. After the conquest of Canaan led by Joshua, the nation was ruled by judges chosen by God. But corruption and apostasy increased, along with military losses, until at the end of this era of some fourteen hundred years, anarchy reigned, with ‘everyone doing what was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 21:25). The Book of Judges ends with these words, and the reminder that, ‘these was no king in Israel’. When the Lord again speaks to his people through his prophet Samuel, the Lord gives his nation a human king.

**1. The Book of Samuel**

Why are we turning to the Book of Samuel today? Partly because we have studied Joshua and Judges previously, and the Book or Books of Samuel continue the history of God’s people, as just indicated. One and two Samuel were originally one book that was divided for convenience when the Hebrew Bible was translated in the Greek- the Septuagint. The name ‘Samuel’ was given because he was the prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. ‘Samuel’ means ‘heard of God’ or as we read, ‘Because I have asked him from the Lord’ (1:20). He was an answer to prayer *par excellence*! It is interesting that it is the nativity of Samuel and not the two kings that is recorded. We might compare the nativity of Moses, as well as that of John the Baptist, and of Jesus, as we did in our introduction.

Another reason for studying this book is the insight it gives into the life of David. Many of the Psalms that we sing were written by David, and sometimes the title of the Psalm tells us the context in which it was written. For example, when we look at Psalm 3 we find that it was written when David fled from his son Absalom. We went back and read of this incident as recorded in 2Samuel. These is no book called ‘David’ but the Book of Psalms could bear his name!

Although David wrote many Psalms, there is no indication that he wrote the Book of Samuel, even though he is still alive at the end of the book. We do not know who wrote this book, although we are told about a book of Jashar (2Sam 1:18), and about records written in books of ‘Samuel the seer, Nathan the prophet, and Gad the seer’ (2Chron 29:29). What we do know is that it a book written by a person inspired of the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21).

David, as we will learn, was the greatest king of Israel. He became king at the age of thirty and ruled for forty years. His pathway to the throne was beset with many dangers and threats to his life, from King Saul in particular. In this book we find our favourite Bible stories like, the boy Samuel, Saul and the lost donkeys, and especially David and Goliath. These stories all fit into the big picture of the Bible. They are part of the history, or what Jesus calls, ‘the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’ that pointed forward to him (Luke 24:44).

As the Son of Mary, Jesus was a descendant of David. He was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Paul refers to Jesus as the Son of David: ‘Born of the seed of David according to the flesh’ (Rom 1:3). God made a covenant with David which was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, and his exaltation to the throne of God in heaven (cf. 2Sam 7:12-16). The Book of Samuel is rarely quoted in the NT, but we do find Paul referring to it in 2Corinthians 6:18, and there are many allusions to the life of David in particular, ‘a man after God’s own heart’ (Acts 13:22).

**2. The birth of Samuel**

During the dark years following the death of Samson at the hand of the Philistines, we learn of a family living in the hills of Ephraim just north of Jerusalem- Jerusalem was not yet conquered by the Israelites. Elkanah is called ‘an Ephraimite’ (1:1), but it is not clear if this refers to his tribe or his place of residence; elsewhere his lineage shows him to be of the tribe of Levi (1Chron 6:22-26). Elkanah had two wives; polygamy was not uncommon in those days. Some think this points to him being a rich man, but most likely he took a second wife because his first wife had no children.

Elkanah was a god-fearing man who worshipped the Lord according to the Law of Moses. The Ark of the Covenant that the people had carried with them from Mt Sinai was located in Shiloh at this time. The Law of Moses required all adult males to go up to the house of God three times a year. Elkanah went up each year from his city called Ramah, for short, ‘to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of hosts’ or the Lord Almighty (1:1,3). This particular feast may have been the Feast of Tabernacles, a joyous festival frequented by families after the summer harvest. His two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, accompanied Elkanah to the sanctuary in Shiloh, some 10km east of Ramah.

Apart from being a god-fearing man, Elkanah appears to be a loving husband and father. He gave his wives and children portions of meat from the offering he made to the Lord at Shiloh. It is written that ‘he loved Hannah’ even though she was barren, and he gave her a ‘double portion’: ‘The Lord had closed her womb’ (1:5). Elkanah, like David and Solomon, saw children as a gift from God (Ps 127:3). Hannah also understood that children are a gift from God because she asked God to give her a child, a male child (1:11).

The story of Samuel’s miraculous birth would not be complete without a ‘down-to-earth’ touch of rivalry between two women, in this case two wives. When Sarah could not have children she gave her maid to Abraham. After bearing a son, the maid despised Sarah, and she in turn treated Hagar harshly and sent her away (Gen 16:4f). Being unable to have children was a great shame for a woman in those days. Hannah faced the added hurt of a spiteful, rival wife called Peninnah, who gave Elkanah sons and daughters. Peninnah ‘provoked her severely and made her life miserable because the Lord had closed her womb’ (1:6). Her misery came to a head when each year they made a pilgrimage to the house of the Lord. Hannah became so miserable that she wept all the time and stopped eating.

Hannah’s behaviour was upsetting to Elkanah, who loved her. He asked why she wept and refused to eat anything. Some think he was rebuking Hannah, and even translate, ‘Why is your heart bad?’ instead of, ‘Why is your heart sad?’, but more likely he was trying to comfort her. His words, ‘Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?’ seem to have encouraged Hannah (1:8 NIV). She got up from the table and went to the tent of meeting where she poured out her heart to the Lord (1:10). This tent was the one set up by Moses but may have been made a little more permanent than it was in the desert. The priest, Eli, was sitting at the doorpost, from where he watched Hannah praying (1:9, 12).

Eli, along with his two sons, Hophni (‘Tadpole’) and Phinehas (‘the Nubian’), served as priests at the tabernacle, sacrificing the animals brought by worshippers and presumably attending to the lamps and the showbread (1:3). The Ark of the Covenant and the priesthood feature prominently in the book of Samuel, mainly by way of ritual desecration, corruption and immorality. The situation had become so bad that the Lord stepped in to judge the wicked and revive true religion in his chosen nation. Through Samuel, the Lord resumed communication with his people (3:1). Many years later, the Lord again stepped in to judge his people through the prophet Jeremiah, and then in the NT he came and spoke to us by his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2). This same Jesus will come again to judge the world in righteousness, to condemn the wicked and to save those whom he made righteous through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Hannah’s earnest prayer to ‘the Lord Almighty’ was offered up with utmost humility and profound faith. She had nowhere else to go but to the Lord and so she prayed to the Lord, knowing he was powerful to grant her request. She pleaded with the Lord to remember her, or to look upon her in mercy. She specifically asked the Lord to give her a son, promising that she would dedicate this boy to the Lord as a Nazirite and ‘give him to the Lord all the days of his life’ (1:11). The Nazirite vow meant no cutting of hair or drinking of strong drink. In Israel, the firstborn son belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed with a blood sacrifice (Exod 13:15). Hannah’s vow was to give her son to the Lord literally.

Hannah was a woman of faith, ready to give her most precious possession to the Lord. Is this something you are ready to do? Hannah also has something to teach us about prayer, about pouring out our heart to the Lord. She knew the same ‘throne of grace’ that we know, even though she did not know Jesus as her mediator as we do- which makes her prayer all the more amazing, and maybe a rebuke to you regarding your prayers.

Eli’s reaction to Hannah praying shines light upon the darkness of worship in those days. Hannah’s lips were moving but no words were coming out because she spoke in her heart (1:13). Eli was accustomed to seeking intoxicated people coming to the house of the Lord, and accused Hannah of being drunk in the house of the Lord (1:13,14). Hannah responded to his rebuke saying she was not drunk but a woman in deep sorrow, pouring out her heart to the Lord (1:15). Eli accepted the rebuke and proceeded to pronounce God’s blessing upon her. So it was that Hannah went away having received the blessing of God through the priest. The very recording of this interaction between priest and worshipper shows how unusual it was in these days, days of corruption from the priests down.

Hannah felt assured of God’s peace, and indeed of his answer to her prayer, as she left the house of God. She got up early the next morning to worship with her husband before heading home to Ramah. Back home, Elkanah ‘knew his wife Hannah’ and she conceived- or as we read, ‘The Lord remembered her’ (1:19). The womb that the Lord had closed was about to be opened! In the ‘normal’ course of events, Hannah gave birth to a son and named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I have asked the Lord for him’ (1:20).