

Act of Worship at Home for Sunday 17 November 2024 from Paula Littlewood

Welcome to this act of worship at home beginning with words from Psalm 100: 'Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations'.

Reading

One of the lectionary readings for today is from 1 Samuel chapter 1, verses 4-20 and the first ten verses of chapter 2. This is the story of Elkanah and his two wives, Peninnah who had children and Hannah who was childless. Hannah is tormented by Peninnah and decides to present herself before the Lord at Shiloh where they had gone as a family to worship. Let's pick up the story at verse 9 of chapter 1: *'Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."* As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. *Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."* "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, *"I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."* Eli answered, *"Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."* ...

...in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord him." When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfil his vow, Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, *"After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always."* ...After he was weaned... they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, *"Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord."* And he worshiped the Lord there.'

Reflection

I wonder what made Hannah so desperate for a son. Possibly it was due to social pressure of the time, exacerbated by the fact that Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, was very successful in childbearing. It must have been hard for Hannah to live with Peninnah's gloating. But Hannah is clearly a woman of great faith and perhaps she begins to feel a sense of deep calling that God has something special that is needed of her. Despite her yearning for a son, she promises God that the child will live in the Temple all his life if she is able to conceive.

Let us think of Hannah's pain. How much of our unhappiness comes from chasing goals set before us by social pressure or by others around us telling us what we should do or who apparently seem to have worked out a successful path in life? Do we exacerbate our pain by comparing ourselves to others? Probably, we can all recognise the sorrow Hannah feels holding on to hope in the face of crushing disappointment. We may feel called by God to take on a particular role or action but then it doesn't happen. That can cause acute pain. I remember a good friend of mine was devastated when she presented herself for ministry but was not accepted for training as it was felt she was not suitable.

We all have choices about how we respond to our circumstances. My friend has found other ways to serve God in the Church and uses her talent as a flower arranger to great effect. Hannah chose

to turn to God and remain faithful to him. Peninnah, who had everything that Hannah so desperately wanted, chose to taunt Hannah. Samuel also had to make a choice about how to respond to being sent to live at the Temple. He could have run away but he didn't; he stayed there, ministering before God under Eli and, of course, we know that he is then called by God and became one of the most famous of the prophets, serving God all his life.

Every day, we make hundreds of choices. Small ones like what to have for breakfast or what clothes to wear. Slightly bigger choices might include deciding how to respond when someone is rude or unkind to us or how we reply to a difficult message. Sometimes, we have big choices to make. Do we accept a job we have been offered? Do we stay where we are or move house? Do we take up a role in the church that will otherwise lie vacant? Sometimes we are faced with difficult choices. What might we learn from Hannah and Samuel?

Hannah promised God that she would give up her son to serve in the temple. But she still had a choice to make: did she keep this promise or break it? No doubt we would have understood completely if she had broken her promise. We can imagine her pain as she longed for a child for years, only to finally become pregnant and then give up her son. But Hannah chose to keep her promise, even though it must have been indescribably hard for her. She responded to her Lord in song, not a song of lament, but a song of praise to God. Hannah's song of praise celebrates how God reverses the fortunes of the poor and powerless while overturning the might of the powerful. Perhaps we can start by coming to God in prayer and allowing ourselves to be guided by our faith and trust in God.

Let us pray

(An adaption of a prayer by Ana Gobledale from the URC Prayer Handbook 2024)

Eternal God, we thank you that we can learn so much from the stories of our ancestors in the Bible. We can see that the experiences of Hannah and Samuel are perhaps not as far removed from us that we might, at first, think. We thank you that they can offer us insight and strength, helping us to have faith. Sometimes life is hard, and we suffer. We want to be assured that we, like Hannah, will be fulfilled but we pray that you will forgive us when we think our security and happiness depends on our desires being granted, our expectation that our prayers will be answered in a certain way. Grant us refuge beneath your wing. Remind us of faith even when we are disappointed. Fill us with trust that we can face the hardships of today. Empower us with hope, strong in our unknowing. Shower your grace upon us. Guard our feet as we step into each day, illuminate the path before us or the bench upon which you invite us to sit, overwhelmed by your love. **Amen**

Our hymn is number 186 in Singing the Faith: 'Tell out my soul'

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his Word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his
name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has
done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name, - the Lord, the Mighty One.

3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of His
might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to
flight;
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of His Word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and forevermore!

Let us pray: Lord, as we go into this week, bless us we pray and may we be confident that our lives are built on the sure foundation of you, our Rock. **Amen**