

Sunday 17th November 2024 – Choral Evensong at St. Peter’s Cathedral
Twenty-Sixth after Pentecost
‘Covenant Promise’

Introduction

Last week, we celebrated Remembrance Day and gave thanks for those who fought and died to deliver us from the tyranny of enemies. This afternoon in the Cathedral, the Rev’d Joan Claring-Bould hosted a benefit concert for defence force personnel who have returned from war zones. Servicemen and women are trained and equipped for managing violent conflict and to prevent greater harm. Still, we are all human, and the concert was a way of saying to them: “We see. Thank you. Allow us to show our gratitude”.

Currently, Australians live in relative peace from external enemies. The people of Hannah, the subject of our first reading this evening, lived alongside Philistines also during a period of relative peace with them and other peoples. However, Hannah had a dispiriting family conflict which tested her faith and drove her response. Centuries later, a church was tested, faltered, and drove the writer to respond with the Letter to the Hebrews. Both responses and their fruitful consequences remind us of the hope we share in faith through Jesus Christ.

‘Covenant Promise’

by

The Rev’d Dr. Susan F. Straub

I Samuel 1:21-28, 2:11; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:31-39

Introduction

This evening, we heard two readings concerning people, one who lived approximately 3,000 years ago and the other, 2,000 years ago. Yet their humanity in coping with difficult circumstances, and the centrality in their lives of faith in the ever-loving God, touches our minds and hearts today: their humanity and faith bridge the distance of time.

1 Samuel 1:21-28

The woman, Hannah, was married to Elkanah, a Hebrew ruler-priest who loved this wife of his youth dearly. As prescribed for ruler-priests, Elkanah had later married a second kins-woman, Peninnah. Each wife had her own household. Hannah had no children: any son of hers would have been Elkanah’s rightful heir. Peninnah had many children, sons and daughters.

Every year, Elkanah and the two households of his family, his house, journeyed together from Ramah in the hill-country of Ephraim, a day’s journey (about six hours) of about 24 Kilometres. They travelled on camel or donkey, over country with no roads and hidden dangers. Most likely they travelled with others to offer their sacrificial animals to God at the temple in Shiloh. The temple held the Ark of the Covenant.

Peninnah used these annual events to torment Hannah for her infertility. Worn down until she could take no more, Hannah wept and refused to eat. Once more at Shiloh, Hannah went into the temple. Eli, the priest, saw her praying to Yahweh fervently, in distress too deep for words, for a male child. Silent prayer was so unusual that Eli thought that she was drunk. In her yearning for a son, Hannah did not bargain with her god as did women of other peoples with their gods. No: Hannah made a vow and thus a solemn covenant with the Lord.

In due time, Hannah’s prayer of petition was granted, just as Eli the priest at Shiloh had told her it would be, and she had had faith in believing. She bore a son (1 Sam.1:20). Hannah ‘... named him Samuel, for she said. “I have asked him of the Lord”’. God kept their covenant and, as hard as it would have been, Hannah kept it, too. Elkanah supported Hannah in fulfilling her sacrificial vow.

Hannah probably nursed Samuel for three years, as is still customary among some peoples, and might have fully weaned him by the time he was about five years old (Evans, p.29). However, the fact that the age of the sacrificial bull is given as three years old, strongly suggests that Samuel was only three years old.

Then, in dignified gratitude, Hannah rendered her costly sacrifice with thanksgiving to God. Hannah's words to Eli when she handed her son over to him were: "For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord" (1 Sam. 1:27-28). Hannah's use of the Hebrew word for 'lent' has a double meaning, that is, 'asked for' and 'now given'. This longed-for son had taken away Hannah's shame and delivered her from the taunting and provocation which she had endured from Peninnah.

Samuel, then, was just a little boy when Hannah brought him to the temple to be raised by Eli as a Nazirite, a consecrated priest, that is, one who would minister in the temple as long as he lived. 'Hannah left him there for the Lord' (1 Sam. 1:28) at Shiloh. 'Then (the house of) Elkanah went home to Ramah, while the boy remained to minister to the Lord, in the presence of the priest Eli.' (2:11).

Hannah's song of praise was given not at Samuel's birth but at his handing over. As the boy grew up, God was with him. 'And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.' (1 Sam. 3:20). What he said was true or was shown to be true, and he became a judge in Israel. Samuel was the last of the judges to rule Israel, for he anointed a king, ushering in a new era.

However, as he presented King Saul to Israel, Samuel said: "...here is the king whom you have chosen ... the Lord has set a king over you (1 Sam. 12:13). Then, he invoked the covenant between God and the people as given by Moses at Sinai, with its words of warning, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians ... Now therefore if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. (Exodus 19:4-5).

Hebrews 10:31-39

In Hannah and Samuel, we see foreshadowed the mother/son story of God's redemption of his people, through the birth of a child. Mary's song of praise at Jesus' birth echoed Hannah's song. However, we also understand that entering a covenant with the living God is not to be taken lightly: it requires sacrifice, and it affects other people. The writer of the letter to the

Hebrews, was very concerned that the church was faltering in confidence in the New Covenant made between God and God's people through Christ's sacrifice. It was then, and is so today, that through baptism each member of the church enters that solemn covenant with God, a relationship of mutual obligation, faithfulness, love, and hope.

It seems likely that the church of the Hebrews was in Rome, since the letter ends with 'Those from Italy send you greetings' (Hebrews 13:24). That being the case, then the reading we have just heard has a special poignancy. The letter was written in the latter half of the first century and perhaps just after the death of the Roman Emperor Nero. Nero reigned from 54 to 68 A.D. Following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 A.D. he cast blame for it on Christians and persecuted them brutally.

The writer of the letter urges his readers to recall that the New Covenant is not like that made through Moses. Neither does it require the sacrifice of animals again and again by priests to atone for the sins of God's people. The Hebrews are to renew their confidence, their faith, in Jesus Christ. Through His death, Jesus offered the one true sacrifice for sin, once, for all time, and for the whole world.

Conclusion

Next Sunday, we shall celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. In His resurrection, Jesus defeated death. Thus, Christ is alive and reigns, offering to anyone who believes in him and follows in his way, resurrection life. So, as yesterday to the Hebrews and today to us, let's not shrink back into old, familiar ways or into any prevailing secular ideology. Let's not falter in our confidence in Christ but pray for endurance so that when we have done the will of God in our lives, we may receive what was promised: eternal life.

