

## 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024 – Lent 4 – Pathways of Prayer – 1 Samuel 1:20 ‘The sacramental path’

I once read an article online which was entitled ‘27 reasons why God doesn’t answer prayer.’ I kid you not. The article made lots of very valid points, all of which were backed up by scriptural references and quotations – but I have to admit that when I had finished it, I found myself thinking that perhaps an article on why God doesn’t answer prayer might be better written in just three words: ‘We don’t know.’

Apologies if that sounds flippant, it’s not meant to – but where I want to begin today is simply to acknowledge the fact that **prayer is a profound mystery**. Anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time will have a prayer that either wasn’t answered as they hoped it would, or hasn’t been answered yet, and maybe never will be – at least as we wanted the answer to be.

For all that we might agitate over the world’s problems and have to trust that things will one day be put right, **the greatest test of any believer’s faith is personal**. We want God to do something, for us or for someone close to us – in most cases something which we believe is good and right, certainly something which we very much want to happen – and God either says no or is silent.

How do we respond?

That great mystery, that dilemma, lies at the heart of today’s story. And, let me be clear at the outset that this should not be interpreted simply as a ‘happy ending’ story. Yes, Hannah conceived and yes, her son went on to become one of the greatest human beings that ever lived – but if we jump to the end we miss both the agony of Hannah’s experience, and the sacrifice she was still called to make – after all, Samuel doesn’t live with her beyond his first few years, she goes back to having no children at home relatively quickly.

Some of you may have raised an eyebrow at the choice of this passage for Mothering Sunday from the writers of the course we are following. However, although we can and should celebrate mothers on this day, and all of us were born from our mother’s womb, this day is also painful for many: some of us have lost our mums, a few of us had inadequate mums and some of us desperately long to be mothers or parents, like Hannah, and are not. Humans are unique in being able to cry tears of joy and sadness, and there will be plenty of both today.

Any talk about mystery in our journey of faith cannot, and should not, offer too much explanation – after all, that’s the point. We enter a grey area, and our reflections are tentative. However, there are precious things we can hold onto in this story, and these are what we share today: I hope at least one of the following brief reflections is a word for you today...

**First, God may be silent but he is not absent.** God still cares about every part of our lives, and our first calling is to keep close to him. Hannah still went to worship and pray at Shiloh even though she naturally felt that her prayers were not being heard. To be angry with God is implicitly to affirm that he is there – you can’t be angry with someone who doesn’t exist. It is our very relationship with God that causes us to pour out our hearts. God can deal with our anger – he may be silent for a season, but he is not absent; he is never absent.

**Second, prayer is an outpouring of the heart.** It doesn’t need particular words – God hears the cry of our hearts. It is a funny detail in the story that Eli thought Hannah was mouthing words because she was drunk, when she was simply beseeching God so intently it went deeper than words –

echoing Paul's phrase in Romans about the work of the Holy Spirit in us who prays with 'groans and signs which words cannot express.' God hears our hearts, more than our words – we just need to make time to offer our hearts – and use words if you have to!

**Third, we can support the heartfelt prayers of others.** Until this point in the story, it appears that Hannah was carrying this burden alone. Elkanah her husband encouraged her and loved her, but it's interesting that the text suggests that he doesn't pray with her, he doesn't reinforce her prayer. But Eli does – after his faux pas about the drinking he does the one thing he can do which might make a difference – he offers to add his prayers to hers. God calls us to pray for each other, to carry each other's burdens in this way. That's why we have a confidential prayer chain at both our congregations ready to offer that support in prayer which Eli offered Hannah.

We all need people to support us in prayer – if you have a prayer need, find someone you trust to share it with, or use our prayer chain. God hasn't designed us to carry these things alone. It was when Eli backed up her prayer that the breakthrough came. That might or might not be why – that's the mystery – but it didn't do any harm, did it?

**Fourth, prayer is sometimes about significant moments.** The theme for this week is 'sacramental prayer,' and because the word 'sacrament' means a holy thing dedicated to God, and the message of the bible is that God is interested in all of our lives and all of our lives can be dedicated to God, it means that actually any thing or any time *can* be a sacrament, because it can be something dedicated to God, a moment when God meets with us. Now, we do have official sacraments in the church and I'm not denying those – but the point is that God can meet with us at any time, and we need to be alert to those moments.

This episode was a sacramental moment for Hannah, and many of us will have precious memories of such times for us. Today's story reminds us to be alert for such moments – God is bigger than our routines and our imaginations.

**Finally, God answers prayer in his good time.** In this story, Hannah did conceive, but the author adds this telling phrase in v20 'in the course of time' – it suggests it wasn't immediate, like a Hollywood happy ending. Hannah still had to go on with life as normal, and to trust – and eventually the answer came. It is fascinating that the name Samuel can mean 'his name is God' or 'asked of God' – one meaning suggests certainty, one ambiguity. Our spiritual inheritance is now *and* not yet – and this was Hannah's reality, too.

As we draw the threads together today, **Hannah's story is an invitation to trust, an invitation to persevere, and also an invitation to accept both the joys and pains of mystery.** We can't see the path ahead much of the time – but we know the destination, and we know who journeys with us.

May the Lord continue to meet us in our everyday, and may he inspire us again to hope, to trust and to persevere. Amen.