

# Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2024, Pentecost 26

Readings: **1Samuel 1:4-20**

Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

**Song of Hannah (APBA p.429)**

**Mark 13:1-11**

This time of year is a rich season for those families who have children at school because there are speech nights, graduation ceremonies, valedictory services, and even some late school formals! Our Anglican schools invite the regional bishops and Archbishop to many of these occasions, and through these we hear great stories, listen to fabulous music, and shake hands with gifted young people. In these there is also the opportunity to offer some thoughts to those who are leaving school and pray with them and their families. For the departing year twelve cohorts, the prayer focus is that God will bless those young women and men in the next chapter of their lives.

The Old Testament reading this weekend describes a woman who longed to have a child. Her name was Hannah, and she had been mocked and bullied for years by her husband's other wife because of Hannah's inability to have a baby. We are even told that Hannah was loved by her husband more than the other wife, so there would have been some really tough dynamics in that family! For Hannah there was a deep longing to have a son, and a willingness to do anything for this to happen.

Hannah went to pray and bargain with God in the Jerusalem Temple. This was understood to be a place of primary encounter between God and humanity – and here she is remembered praying, *'If you grant me a son, then I'll give him to the Temple so he can serve you throughout his life'*.

It is an audacious prayer and an indication of the shame a woman had to bear if she was not able to have a child in that culture. As she prayed silently, a priest called Eli completely misunderstood what was happening. He thought she was drunk and publicly reprimanded her, and in response Hannah explained that she was praying with all her heart for God to make something possible. Unaware of the detail – but, recognising her sincerity – Eli prayed that Hannah's prayer be answered in the way she hoped. Soon after we are told that, *"In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son..."*

This is not a text that says if you pray hard enough, and make a deal with God, then your prayer will be answered. I think such an interpretation would be based on a flawed theology and would compound the heartbreak of many women and men who are not able to have children.

However, I do think it is a reminder for those who have children, that our children are gifts from God. Not only when they're doing the things that make us proud, but also when they're making choices we disagree with! Our children are a gift! Our grandchildren are a gift! Our great-grandchildren are a gift!

One of the painful realities for most congregations in our Diocese is the absence of young families and children. Like our Old Testament character, Hannah, there can be a deep sense of grief about this reality. These congregations might nostalgically look back to the nineteen fifties and sixties when Sunday schools were full, and many young families filled our pews... but, many things have changed in society since that time. Young families no longer think of 'church' as the default place in which they'll find community. Schools now gather young families on weekends, while Sunday trading and Sunday sports each offer spaces for people to meet and find community. Families use the internet at home for education, entertainment, and community networking... and the parish website, Youtube channel, and Facebook profile, are just three voices among millions of others.

Like Hannah we might feel mocked by the ability of some denominations to attract and retain young families and children, and we might long for the situation to change. Like Hannah we might also take this situation into prayer asking that somehow... the energy of young families, and the voices of children be again heard in every church and not just in some.

However, this will demand something of us – maybe much of us. At the very least it will demand that we create spaces in which we build authentic relationships with young families and with children. There are plenty of tools to work with... and these include Messy Church, Mainly Music, and Alpha – but, the common threads in each of these are that they are spaces in which people can meet and share food together; spaces to hear the stories on another's life,

and share our own; spaces that offer human friendship and friendship with God; and spaces in which we can learn and pray.

In any potential activity it is important to be clear about why we're doing what we're doing. If the main reason we want young families in church is to have them populate our rosters, and sit on our church councils... I think we will continue to diminish, and perhaps close. But, if our motivation is for those young families to know that they are deeply loved by God, then there is hope for the Church. If our motivation is that we can share with them something of the joy, peace, and purpose we have because of faith in Christ, then, I think there is hope for the Church.

So, as we make plans for Christmas and next year, what are some things we could do to invite young families and children to this church, and to activity and ministry in the life of this church that will be a blessing for them?

Please join me as I close in prayer:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and your love. Through your Spirit, as individuals and as a congregation, give us wisdom to recognise the ways we might helpfully change, and the courage to follow this through. We pray in the name of Christ, who shows us the way. Amen.