

The Infant Samuel – *by Mary Alexander - 15 September 2011*

I recently read the lesson at St. Mary's which was from I Samuel 2, verses 1-10. It was not a passage I remembered, being Hannah's prayer when she gave her first-born son Samuel to God in the temple, but when I looked at it I was astonished to see that it was the Magnificat, more or less. The story is sad, though with a happy ending. Hannah is one of the two wives of Elkanah. The other wife, Peninnah, has several children but Hannah has none. This grieves her, and Peninnah mocks her over it. Elkanah loves Hannah and asks if he is not better than ten sons, but as most wives know, it is not that simple..

Hannah prays desperately at the temple at Shiloh on their annual visit, promising God that if he gives her a son she will dedicate him to his service. Eli the priest mistakes her anguish for drunkenness and reproves her, but when she explains, he tells her to go in peace, and asks the Lord to grant her prayer. She answers 'Let thy handmaid find favour in thy sight', as Mary later said 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word'.

She conceives and bears a son whom she calls Samuel 'because I have asked him of the Lord'. True to her word, she takes him to the temple when he is weaned, and gives him to Eli. There is no indication of how long this took. She does not take him on the annual visit to the temple after he is born, when he was, at most, three months old. When did weaning take place in the ancient Middle East? It would have been later than today (roughly 6 months) and perhaps a lot later. Would Eli the priest want an infant who could not walk or talk? At the youngest Samuel would have been 15 months when he was taken to the temple; three or four years seems more likely.

It is hard to imagine the courage, the fortitude and the strong sense of duty that made Hannah keep her promise to give this longed-for child to God. Fortunately, she later had five more children: three sons and two daughters. Obviously, she never forgot Samuel and each year when the family went to the temple she made a little coat and gave it to him. Her sacrifice can, perhaps, be linked to Mary's life, for although she kept Jesus until he was grown up, she knew that he had an unknown destiny and had to suffer his loss when he was crucified. Samuel became a great man in his day; Jesus became a much greater one.

Medieval scholars liked to find parallels between the Old and the New Testament, but the similarity between Hannah's song and the Magnificat is not one of the famous examples which found their way into art, or literature, as for example Jonah and the Whale or the Sacrifice of Isaac.

There are several other stories of unexpected births in the Bible. A well-known one is Isaac being born to the aged Sarah and Abraham. This seemed so unlikely that Sarah laughed when the angel told Abraham that she would have a son. Sarah was jealous of Ishmael the son Abraham had by Hagar the slave and made Abraham send them away, but because he

was Abraham's son God protected them in the wilderness. Isaac's wife Rebekah was also barren until he prayed to God and she bore the twins Jacob and Esau.

Another obvious example is the birth of John the Baptist to the barren Elizabeth (leaving aside the fact that we now know that infertility is not just a woman's problem). These births were of men who were important in some way for God's plan. Mary, of course, was not barren, but the birth was a miracle caused by God. As I am not a Biblical scholar I don't know quite what all this means.

The fact that Hannah's son is known as 'the Infant Samuel' is because of a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds c.1776, showing a small boy kneeling in prayer with a puzzled expression, entitled *The Infant Samuel*. The 18th century was not generally a time of religious painting in this country, and this painting was one of a series celebrating the innocence of childhood by many painters, including our own John Russell of Guildford. Engravings of this painting were very popular, and the child was also shown in ornaments. It became something of a cliché so that no-one (over 50) is surprised when Aunt Dahlia, in a P.G. Wodehouse story, hurls a terracotta figure of the Infant Samuel across the room to relieve her feelings, or when Molesworth ends his description of Divinity lessons at his prep school with the words 'boo to the Infant Samuel'. (Actually, Molesworth liked Divinity because of all the bloodthirsty stories.)

This is a rather strange footnote to a story of enormous trust and faith in God.