

Tockington Methodist Church

The Green, Tockington, South Gloucestershire, BS32 4NJ

10am Sunday 17 November 2024

Lectionary:

1 Samuel 1:4-20
Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

Sermon

This Sunday is Safeguarding Sunday, so I want to keep this in mind as we consider the lectionary readings this morning.

In our first reading we have heard part of the story of Hannah. Hannah's husband seems to have a particular soft spot for Hannah and gives her additional portions of the sacrifice – more than to his other wife and her children.

The writer notes that Elkanah loves Hannah, even though she has been unable to bear children. In the culture of the time this would be seen as a major stigma, and Peninnah (the wife who has produced children) would provoke Hannah because of this. Hannah is therefore victim of intrafamilial bullying.

It seems somehow to be human nature to need to denigrate those who don't fit into societal norms, and to mock them. Even in our supposedly 'woke' or 'caring' society there are still tendencies to treat others as somehow 'lesser'. Some of you may have heard about Fortnum and Mason inviting the GB Olympic team to a meal after their reception at Buckingham Palace – but completely omitting to invite the GB Paralympic team, who had also been at the Buckingham Palace reception. Fortnum and Mason have tried to claim this was an administrative error, but it's hard not to see it as a yet another societal snub to the disabled, making them out to be lesser persons. As you might expect Channel 4's "The Last Leg" on Friday, with its focus on disability and inclusion, saw it as completely unacceptable – and have already made it clear that they are inviting the paralympic team to their end of year party.

Hannah's husband, hopefully trying to be kind to her, asked why she was so sad, just because she doesn't have children, wasn't he worth more to her than that? How often do we do this? Taking someone's distress and trying to alleviate it by focussing on something else... When a child desperately wanting time with an absent parent is reassured "but you can play with your computer". The intent may be to comfort, but the failure to recognise and validate the cause of the sadness serves only to magnify it – in this example, not only do they now not have the absent parent, but whoever is attempting to reassure them is not listening to their feelings about this.

How often do we fail to really listen to those experiencing distress?

In her desperation, Hannah goes to pray. But as she prays in her grief, Eli the priest mistakes her grief for intoxication and admonishes her for this. How often do we jump to

conclusions and make presumptions about someone's situation? When Hannah answers back to Eli one can surmise that this took some considerable courage – in a male focussed society to answer back to a male, and worse a priest could be said to show the level of Hannah's desperation and distress. At least at this point Eli is sensitive enough to bless her 'Go in Peace' and to pray with her that 'the God of Israel (may) grant the petition you have made'. Later Hannah has her Samuel.

Last week ITV broadcast a programme 'Her Majesty the Queen: Behind Closed Doors' (which if you didn't see, I would commend to you – it's available online at ITVX). The programme followed Queen Camilla's commitment to raising awareness of domestic abuse and sexual violence. I watched it primarily because one of the people featured was Sharon Baker, a senior Avon and Somerset Police officer that I used to work with in a previous role. Sharon had the courage to admit that she was a survivor of domestic abuse and has spoken out about how difficult it had been to say this given her role as a police commander who was suppose to be tough and resilient. Within a few days of her speaking out within the force, over 130 other police officers and staff had contacted her to say 'me too'. She has gone on to reform Avon and Somerset Police's response to those living with domestic abuse, but also to represent the force and policing nationally making this a priority area of work. She is currently based in the force Professional Standards Department where she has been acting Superintendent.

A large part of the Safeguarding learning from Sharon, and from Hannah's story, is the necessity to provide a safe place where people know they can say what is happening for them, and know that they will be properly listened to and then supported.

This is where the tragedy of what has happened this week in the Church of England has come from. The Archbishop of Canterbury when made aware of abuse happening with a particular person within the church, did not explicitly act to ensure that this was addressed. It seems he knew, but he presumed that others were dealing with it, rather than using his position to ensure that not only were Police informed, but that they acted. There is no suggestion that he was himself involved in any misdeeds, but that he failed to act sufficiently on his knowledge of these deeds. His resignation was therefore inevitable as he accept responsibility for yet another failing within the global church.

As so often the case, the failure to follow due process can contribute to allowing abuse to continue. Nor can we sit here as Methodists and say 'Oh well, we all know about the failings of the Catholics and now it's the Anglicans' because we know from our own reviews that we have plenty of our own skeletons in the cupboards, and there are senior Methodist clergy under investigation for both what they may have done, but also what they have failed to address appropriately.

When I worked for the Connexional Team, part of my role was delivery of Safeguarding training, and I would commend the Church's training in this area to you. The most important thing we can do is to be aware of the signs of need, to be pastorally sensitive to hear what is really being said, and to respond appropriately when people are asking for help. It is about listening with our whole being – to hear, but also to see and to sense and support.

Our Hebrews reading was most likely written to a group of new Christians who were experiencing significant harassment from the Roman authorities and possibly

considering returning to the Synagogue for an easier time of things. But they are admonished to encourage one another – even more so as they see the Day approaching.

Likewise, we need to seek to move back to those days when it was said “See how those Christians love one another”. With all that’s happening in the wider churches, it can be understandable that the world sees us as an unsafe place. I love the strapline I spotted on a new Methodist graphic – “The Methodist Church – a place to belong”. Imagine if we could really make our churches feel they are where we belong – and then show that to others that they might also feel they belong too.

In the context of the Hebrews reading ‘the Day’ is the anticipated return of Jesus – in short the end of the world. Potentially this is how many read the gospel reading today – a warning that there will be wars and rumours of wars – nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines – and this will be the beginning of the end of the world.

Does this sound familiar? Does it feel scary just a week after Remembrance Sunday to be worrying about a world on the edge of war?

Jesus warns of those who will claim to speak in his name, but will actually lead many astray.

One cannot help but see what has happened in the last weeks in the USA as being rather like this. Trump has been brought into power, claiming a spiritual authority, and with the backing of large parts of the evangelical churches. It’s hard to feel confident for the future when such a powerful person is seeking to put a journalist in charge of defence, and an anti-vaxer in charge of health, and an alleged sex trafficker in charge of justice.

I currently work at Bristol Baptist College which is home, among other things, to the Centre for the Study of the Bible and Violence, and their director Revd Dr Helen Paynter has recently published a book called the “The Church, The Far Right, and The Claim to Christianity” which highlights the way that the far right, symbolised by Trump in the US, but also Nigel Farage and ReformUK, are using Christian-sounding language, despite their allegiance and values being contrary to gospel values.

In the context of such unease, is it simplistic to take Hebrews’ encouragement to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” at face value?

The reality is there are times when our faith is all we have, and there are times when that faith calls us to action. In the context of Safeguarding Sunday, can we commit ourselves to be awake to the needs of those around us who may feel less than safe, who may be vulnerable, who need us to be that “still quiet voice of calm” alongside them that will support them to access the help they need?

Can our faith support us to challenge that which we see in the world that is wrong and to speak out against it – whatever the cost?

Can we stand firm in our Christian commitment remembering both what Jesus has promised us and what we have promised him.

AMEN