

OT reading: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 OT p254

Gospel reading: Luke 2:41-end NT p57

We've just been talking about gifts we've given and received, and I want us to look at our two readings today in terms of gifts: gifts given by God to humans, and gifts given back to God in gratitude. But just before that, I have to acknowledge that we've just taken a huge leap forward in our readings, haven't we? On Tuesday during the Christingle service we had the manger here at the front of church, with a baby Jesus in it. I was holding the baby as I preached. At our midnight service and on Christmas Day we celebrated Christ the newborn King, we sang 'Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning!'

That was Wednesday. Four days later, today, our Gospel reading takes us 12 years into the future, with Jesus a thoughtful adolescent, around the time he would have become bar mitzvah.

Is it a problem to go zooming backwards and forwards in time, as we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life? Well, you tell me. I think it can lead to a certain amount of confusion, but I expect we can handle it. We do it in our own lives, a lot. I remember hugging my teenaged son, consoling him when some pets had died, and I could feel myself hugging an adolescent bigger than me, and my tiny baby, both at the same time. I suspect that's not at all an unusual experience for a mother.

Our readings today have a lot to say about mothers, and their sons. I had a chance to study these readings, in preparation for this sermon, with another mum in this congregation. We talked about how these readings bring back memories from our own childhood, and about if, and how, they speak to us as mothers. So a lot of what you hear in this sermon comes from the prayerful discussion of mothers.

Hannah is the first mother we encountered in our readings today. For me, there's a real dissonance between reading about what Hannah did, and my own feelings. You'll remember that Hannah desperately wanted a child, as her barrenness was a huge social stigma which caused her to be bullied by her husband's other wife. That statement in itself is pretty culturally dissonant to us, isn't it? Hannah prayed faithfully and the Lord answered her prayer: she and her loving husband had the longed-for son, Samuel. And when little Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him to the temple and left him there to grow up serving God. His mother used to make him a little robe and take it for him when she visited the temple each year.

Aaaargh! How can you sit there listening to that and not wonder what on earth makes this OK? I am, and have always, been so horrified by the idea of a woman giving up her longed-for son, that I find it hard to pay attention to the rest of the reading. I do realise that not everyone hears the reading this way, and it's helpful for me to be reminded of that. And I also studied history and archaeology, so I'm capable of understanding how problematic it is when we try to apply modern thinking and expectations to past times. But still, I struggle...

But I can see a beautiful side to this story, all the same. God gave Hannah a son, whom she fed and nurtured and loved for about 4 years. With that son, all Hannah's shame and misery was undone, and her faith was rewarded. And Hannah didn't cling to her son and refuse to share him, she was the absolute opposite of the 'helicopter parent' which people worry about nowadays. She was willing to recognise that God had given her son, and she was willing to trust him back to God in ways which made more sense in their culture, and ways which allowed

Samuel to grow up to be a great prophet and servant of the Lord. I admire Hannah, and I see that she is a model for all parents who want to hold their children so close that they can't imagine trusting God to look after them as they begin to go free. Hannah received Samuel as a gift, and she basically gave that gift back to God, in obedience and gratitude. We're not asked to do the same with our children today, but we are challenged to hand over control, from ourselves, to God. A lot of the problems in our lives come from trying to control everything, and everyone. Knowing that God is the one who's really in control is a repeated, maybe even daily, lesson. Giving the ones we love back to God, just in terms of how we attempt to hold onto them, helps them to grow:

"And the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people."

Mary and Joseph also received Jesus as a gift from God. I imagine it was a less obvious gift, with more challenges associated, and less social kudos than Hannah's gift of Samuel, but they did have understanding of how this baby Jesus was a gift not only to themselves, but also to their people and from there to the whole world. They had an admirably non-helicopter parent approach, too, as can be seen in the way that they didn't miss Jesus until their journey home was already a day old. Part of this comes from their culture, as we see them travelling in a group of relatives and friends, each one looking out for the children scattered among the travelling companions. There's a lot of trust here, for the boy Jesus and especially for the people of Nazareth who were travelling with them. Culturally, I find that hard to imagine, but I have been on church trips where I saw some of that extended family behaviour going on, and some of you who are from more community-based cultures may have much more experience of it than someone like me, from individualistic Europe.

So, when they realise they have lost Jesus, Mary and Joseph must have not only had the usual anxiety of parents who've lost their growing adolescent, but also an added concern: Lord God, have we lost your gift to us, your gift to the world? I think there's a world of panic in Mary's phrase: 'Child, why have you treaded us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously looking for you'.

Of course, where they found him makes perfect sense, with hindsight. It made perfect sense to Jesus. If you can remember being 12, you can probably identify with Jesus' astonishment at their struggles to find him. Wasn't it obvious?

But this is more than a thoughtless pre-teen, failing to consider his parents' feelings. This is a growing boy desperate to be in his Father's house. We can't guess what that meant to 12 year old Jesus, who had grown up knowing that God is father to all, but may have been growing into some particular understanding of God as his father. We don't know what Mary and Joseph did, and didn't tell him, but clearly they didn't understand his desire to be in his Father's house, so it seems they were treating him as a fairly ordinary boy. Maybe it's quite reassuring to know that Jesus wasn't treated as the Son of God at home, but with the quiet love and care that any boy would expect from his loving parents.

If Jesus was treated like a normal boy at home, the teachers sitting in the temple found him far from ordinary. His parents finally found him sitting among them. He wasn't teaching, our reading says, but he was listening and asking questions with great understanding, and also amazing them with his answers. All Jewish boys were well educated in Scripture and history, but Jesus clearly had something else to add to that education. Part of what he had was a deep

desire: 'Did you not know that I MUST be in *my Father's* house?' It doesn't seem to be the adolescent desire to show off knowledge and talents, it seems to have been hunger and thirst to be where God is.

"Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them, and his mother treasured all these things in her heart."

Jesus went home with his parents. And notice the echo from Samuel's story, which Luke deliberately places at this point:

"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years^[1] and in divine and human favour."

Luke draws the parallels with young Samuel absolutely clearly: both children are an unexpected gift from God, both children return to God's temple with a desire to serve him, both grow in divine and human favour. They are gifts given, and gifts given back in gratitude, and as they grow they begin to bring blessings.

We've sung Christina Rossetti's line often today:

"What can I give him, poor as I am?"

And the response:

"Give my heart."

For Hannah, that meant returning the young boy Samuel to the temple where she had desperately prayed for a baby. It feels to me like she literally gave her heart, as she left that little boy at the temple for training and a life of service. Her spontaneously offered gift to God allowed Samuel to guide his people through the turbulent stages of their history which resulted in the rise of King David. But, really, I don't think that God is asking any of us to give up our small children – those were different days, and very specific and unusual times.

For Mary, Joseph and young Jesus, each of them had to consider what 'give my heart' meant to them. Mary gave up control of her life to God in an unusually physical way. She went through unmarried pregnancy, birth and life as a refugee as a result of her remarkable trust in God. She treasured everything up in her heart and we think she confided all these things later to Luke, as he was writing his Gospel. So the story of Luke includes the testimony of a young woman who gave her heart to God, unreservedly.

Joseph gave his heart in some challenging, practical ways. Again, he gave up control and trusted God through the confusion of his young betrothed having a baby which could not have been his. He trusted God's word as it came to him in dreams, and he saved Jesus' young life as a result. His 12 year old son amazed the teachers in the great temple, so Joseph must have taught Jesus very powerfully what all Jewish children must learn, how to love their Lord with their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might.

Hannah, Mary and Joseph all gave up control – this is one of the ways they gave their hearts to the Lord. They didn't give up responsibility – Hannah provided for her son as he learned in the temple, Mary and Joseph nurtured their son and took action to protect him. Looking at them, can we learn something of what giving our heart might really look like?

It doesn't mean opting out of our responsibilities in life – how we meet our responsibilities is a testimony to our love for God and our love for others. But in my experience, giving my heart to God, just a little bit more each time, means recognising where I've been trying to keep control

for myself. My areas of anxiety are the parts of my life which I haven't given to Jesus. Mary and Joseph were anxiously looking for Jesus, when he was, in fact, safely where he belonged, in his Father's house. At that point in their lives (and perfectly understandably) they weren't on God's wavelength, they were running on their own. And their own understanding got it wrong.

Just in practical terms, I learned years ago (but continually have to re-learn) that if I've lost something, I need to stop and ask God to help me find it. Sometimes, if I really still can't find it, I stop again and say, 'OK, God, are you trying to get my attention? Is this lost thing a way of getting me to look at other ways where I'm trying to take the control back from you?' That's a fairly painful thing to do. I don't like giving up control. But as Hannah realised, as the boy Jesus realised, handing our hearts over to our Father in Heaven is actually a way of bringing our hearts back home.

As we head for 2025, I suggest we can sum up this gift of our heart to God in the prayer of Saint Augustine. Let's bow our heads and spend a minute reflecting on that prayer now:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.

Amen