

Sunday 18th November, 2018
The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

1 Samuel 1:4-20
Psalm: Song of Hannah
Hebrews 10:11-14,19-25
Mark 13:1-11

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’ ‘Do you see all these great buildings?’ replied Jesus. ‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.’”

Every one will be thrown down. It’s a theme which actually has its place in more than just today’s Gospel passage. And although scholars look back on Jesus’ words and relate them to the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem some twenty years later, I think his words take on a greater significance when we read them in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures, and become more meaningful in the light of Jesus’ key ministry of bringing justice to this world.

Let’s go back to the Hebrew Scriptures - to that wonderful story of Hannah, and how she is comforted (eventually) by Eli the Priest, who says to her ‘Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’ I’ve always been fascinated by the story of Hannah. She’s a truly unique character. Not only does she receive a lot more attention than is typical in most Bible stories, but her faith outstrips that of many of the male characters presented.

But what is most beautiful I think about her story is the song that she sings immediately after she gives birth to the son of promise, Samuel. We heard her words in the form of the Psalm today, and this is where the connection leaps out for me with the words of Jesus.

In much the same way as the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise, signifies that everything has changed, so Hannah's proclamation is one inherently about justice - about the over-turning of the expected order of things. "My heart exults in the Lord: my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies: because I rejoice in your salvation", she begins. And she goes on to express that most wonderful notion of justice

The bows of the mighty are broken:
but the feeble gird on strength.

Those who are full now search for bread:
but those who were hungry are well fed.

The barren woman has borne sevenfold:
but she who has many children is forlorn.

You raise up the poor from the dust:
and lift the needy from the ash heap.

You make them sit with the rulers:
and inherit a place of honour.

For the pillars of the earth are yours:
and on them you have set the world.

This is where the words "every one will be thrown down" struck such a chord with me - it is as though, for God's realm of justice and peace to be ushered in, as Hannah prayed, something must first fall and crumble. A global analogy might be how the wall that separated East and West Berlin had to physically be torn down before a new era of peace could begin.

In the personal realm, I liken it to the clearing of space within us in order that God might be born; that God might find a space to live within us. And often, that can only come with something else being thrown down, or thrown out.

From a broader perspective, for God's realm or reign of justice to come upon the world, there is much that must be thrown down. What needs to be thrown down, then?

- The idea that anything meaningful can be achieved through violence;
- The notion that you can enforce your own twisted and extreme ideas upon others simply because you believe them;
- The concept that the world is ours to do with as we wish, and damn the consequences;
- The stereotyping of people, or groups of people, so that we assume we know exactly who someone is just because of the way they look, or which group they belong to;
- The way in which some people are marginalized from society simply because of their age, or gender, or sexuality, or social status.

All of these are things that exist in our world today. And all are barriers - barriers to the ushering in of God's reign of justice - that justice about which Hannah praised, and about which Jesus taught and embodied.

But for us - or perhaps I should own this a bit more, and say for *me*, all of this seems so hard. It's so big. I don't know where to begin. I don't know how to stop people using violence as a means to their ends. I don't know how to argue with those who believe that climate change is a myth and this earth will most likely be unchanged for several more millennia. I don't see how I can influence people who choose to oppress others...

So how can I believe in this reign of justice, when it seems a pipe dream; when my heart is broken every day by what I see around me?

Well, the first step is to recognize my own sphere of influence. Because, actually, I *can* do something. I can care for the environment as best I can. I can treat everybody with dignity and respect, and try and instil those values in my children. I can speak out against injustice when I see it. And I can pray for peace...

And I can hope and pray that God's will be done... in spite of everything that seems to stand against it.

So this week I am committing myself to looking - really closely - to seeing where God is at work, in bringing in this kingdom of justice and peace that Hannah so believed so that rather than despair, I might see signs of hope.

Rubem Alves (b. 1933, in Brazil) was a theologian and philosopher, who is regarded as one of the founders of liberation theology. He has much to say about hope, this kind of hope to which I refer today. Let me finish with a short passage from his book, "Tomorrow's Child".

"What is hope? It is the suspicion that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress us and repress us is not the last word. It is the hunch that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe. That the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual. And that in a miraculous and unexpected way, life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and to resurrection.

But, the two, suffering and hope, must live from each other. Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair. But hope without suffering creates illusions, naivete, and drunkenness. So let us plant dates, even though we who plant them will never eat them. We must live by the love of what we will never see.

It is a refusal to let our creative act be dissolved away by our own need for immediate sense experience. And it's a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren. Such disciplined love is what has given saints, revolutionaries, and martyrs the courage to die for the future they envisage. They make their own bodies the seed of their own highest hopes."

Let us all hope, and pray, and work, that God's kingdom of justice might reign.

In the name of God. Amen