

Sunday 10
7/6/2015

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 1:1-2:10

Psalm 16

Mark 3:20-27

When God comes

We have noted before that in history there are no true beginnings. Everything always happens in the messy middle of the unfolding of the complex human story. When we seek to tell a story we have to *choose* where to start, to limit how far back we will go in declaring “it all began when...” The best place to start is one which sets the tone we think appropriate to make sense of the story which is to follow. It will tell us how to read the story, who is most important, and what kinds of things we might expect as the story unfolds.

Our lectionary over the next few months traces the establishment of the kingship in Israel. It is, in large part, the story of David. Yet David’s story is preceded by that of the prophet Samuel. Samuel is the last of the great “judges” of Israel, those figures like Deborah and Gideon and Samson who rose up at certain times in Israel after the conquest of Canaan to meet some occasional need of the people. Samuel is a complex figure. He can grieve at the rejection by God of Israel’s first king, Saul, and he can remove the head from the shoulders of some foreign king who was bested by Israel’s forces. His is both a sensitive and a “muscular” faith. We will hear more of Samuel over the months to come.

But the prelude to Samuel himself is the story of his mother, which we have heard in this morning. The telling of the story of the kingship of Israel begins with a woman who, on account of her being childless, is tormented by her “sister wife”. This torment Hannah suffers in silence. She grieves; she weeps, and cannot express what is wrong to her husband. She begins to find voice as she turns in prayer to God. She is blessed by a fumbling priest, and is finally surprised to find herself pregnant. In the course of this unfolding of events Hannah moves from need, to trust, to submission and, finally, to gratitude. She moves from suffering silence to full voice in her final songful prayer:

²There is no Holy One like the Lord, none besides you;

there is no Rock like our God...

⁷The Lord makes poor and makes rich;

he brings low, he also exults.

⁸He raises the poor from the dust;

he lifts the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes

and inherit a seat of honour.

Hannah has nothing more to say in the story after this; there is nothing more to say so far as the purpose of the telling the story is concerned. She has experienced, and now spoken, what happens when the God of Israel comes. And so she has spoken of what will happen in the establishment of the monarchy Israel: a lifting up and a humbling of humble and arrogant people. God is the principal protagonist in this story, and once Hannah has described this God and his ways in her song her part in the telling of the story ends.

This story, then, is not about how God might bless us if we are downtrodden enough or pray hard enough. Hannah's story is not one we can repeat ourselves. There is here no formula for contriving the blessing of God, as if to be poor and to be oppressed is to be able to force God's hand. There is no promise of a happy ending for us here and now.

Hannah's story is simply an account of what happens when this God comes. It is the story of what happened for Hannah when God heard her prayer, and remembered, and blessed. In a different way it is a story of what will happen for David and the kingship, and so what happened for Israel, when God acquiesced to Israel's demand for a king.

The good news, and what needs to be heard at the beginning of the story of David, is the announcement of the rule not of a king but of God godself. True beginnings happen in history when the kingdom of God becomes manifest. In relation to the stories of the kings, the kingdom of God is one which challenges our fascination with the personalities and the powers of our political processes. Despite our sense of the dismal state of contemporary political debate and process, we continue to remain captivated by it, as if it were – under the right circumstances – capable of delivering something new, fresh and finally life-giving. But the importance of celebrity and influence is relativised by Hannah's fragility and surprise and faithfulness. The presence of the kingdom of God and the possibility of something new is cannot be "read off" the world around us. A childless woman is no promise of the coming of an extraordinary king like David, any more than a girl who was to sing again Hannah's song 1000 years later was herself a promise of the coming Christ. (Mary's song – the Magnificat [Luke 1.46-55] – is based on Hannah's song).

In her final prayer Hannah sings of herself as one exalted and raised from the dust, made to "sit with princes". And she anticipates what David himself will eventually have to suffer: a bringing low, even as God gives strength to his king. Whether we are David or Hannah, what is most important for us to know is that this is the kind of God who is working through our stories in the messy middle to lift us up or to humble us, to bring us to voice or to silence. All of this is that we might know what truly is life and power and a true beginning, and that we might be brought with Hannah and David to sing as they did their enjoyment and praise of God. By the grace of this God may we, his people, also be blessed with such faith and hope as had David and Hannah in the one who "gives voice to a silent woman, who empties a full king, who hears and answers." (Brueggemann*), discovering in God our true beginning, and end. Amen.

**In W Brueggemann and P D Miller (1992). Old Testament theology : essays on structure, theme, and text. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, p.233. Brueggemann's essay in this volume, "1 Samuel 1 – a sense of a beginning" has provided much of the material for this sermon.*
