

Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent 2021 (Mothering Sunday)  
14/03/21 Cathedral IOM Zoom 10.30am service

Readings: I Sam 1: 20-end; John 19: 25-27

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## **The Big Plan**

Prayer: "Open our eyes Lord...we want clearer vision; clearer vision to see more of your Big Plan"

Have you ever been involved with something which you thought was quite personal to you, then began to realise that it held a far greater and wider significance than you could ever have imagined?

As a Ward Manager, I once made a totally innocent request which I believed was just going to impact my ward...and gradually realised that I had stirred up an old and bitter concern of the whole unit, quite inadvertently! The attitude of colleagues, albeit very short-lived, left me in no doubt that what I had suggested for my own ward, might be fine for me, but they feared its implications for themselves!

And sometimes it works the other way round...we take something of broad significance and make it "all about me".

Mothering Sunday was about appreciating our wider Christian Family and the nurture of the Mother Church; a short holiday to come together and celebrate God's Love and nurture of everyone, with an anticipation of Easter joy. But it has become something else, something more personal, with some praiseworthy elements, but sadly, far less inclusive than the original Mothering Sunday.

The two Bible readings today might appear to be about isolated events, with implications just for those immediately involved. They can be read as such and I believe God can still speak to us through such a reading.

But we learn a lot more about God, when we understand the context and the broader significance of one passage of scripture in relation to other passages of scripture and in relation to God's Big Plan...in so far as we can ever really scratch the surface of that Plan!

Hannah, in the Old Testament Reading, prays desperately about her childless situation; she had endured taunting and misunderstanding, even from the priest; but she does go on to give birth to a son, Samuel. It may seem odd to us, even cruel, for Hannah to leave this longed for child to be brought up in the Temple. If it makes it any easier, a child wouldn't be weaned in that culture until they were about 4 years old; and we read that the parents did visit Samuel and take gifts. But why does Hannah offer Samuel back to God?

Is it simply from a deep gratitude for being able to bear a child? It does show immense trust in God.

Or is it that Hannah had some sense of a greater work of God going on, over and above her own desire to have a child? Read on into the next verses and her song of praise suggests so; it probably reminds you of Mary and the words of the Magnificat. It is not all about having a child...but about God's plans for the world.

Samuel does indeed grow up and take a significant role in Israel's history and beyond; he marks the change from the violent period of the Judges, when everyone did as they liked, with little regard for God, into the time of the Monarchy for Israel. And Samuel goes on to become the prophet who will eventually anoint King David. And from the line of David, comes Messiah, Jesus.

I wonder what would have happened if Hannah had just kept Samuel for herself? Would he have known that he had not fulfilled his God-ordained plan? How would they both feel, knowing there could have been so much more?

And then the Gospel. A very moving account which we can explore more on Good Friday, as we follow the Stations of the Cross.

Again, we could read these gospel verses very simply. They are profound, expressing the huge compassion of Jesus; Jesus wanting to ensure the care of his mother and a disciple, probably John. Jesus arranging this, even amidst untold personal suffering. Jesus following the commandment to honour our parents; certainly, the care of widows, orphans and foreigners was frequently emphasised in the Hebrew scriptures.

Or could there be even more to this?

Many see in these verses another layer of meaning: that through the salvation about to be accomplished on the cross, there is a whole redefining of family. Family is not just our human blood family, but everyone within the family of God, joined together, through union with Christ.

If you look in Mark chapter 12, Matthew Chapter 3 and Luke chapter 8, they all record an incident where Jesus' mother and brothers are looking for him, concerned for his wellbeing, worried that he isn't eating enough... but when Jesus is told his mother and brothers are looking for him, he just continues his teaching, saying that all who hear and do the will of God are his family.

Do those words from the Cross define the new widening of our family? Could they be preparation for the new relationships possible within the church?

There are other views too:

Some scholars interpret the “beloved disciple” not simply as John, but as a literary device for representing all disciples, all those who love and follow Jesus.

And this moment at the Cross is key in the special reverence some hold for Mary. Some interpret these words of Jesus as marking her unique relationship with all followers.

Whichever way we understand this event, there is a sense that these few words of Jesus, spoken from the Cross, must hold deep significance, perhaps beyond the human need of just two people.

So how might we respond to today's readings? To the idea of God's purposes and plans being so much bigger than we can imagine?

We are all more aware than ever, I'm sure, of our connection to the whole world. How one action or words shared can have a huge ripple effect, and not always for good. But how much more can this be true, and always for good, with God?

At the end of The Link today, there are some further points for reflection during the week. One is very practical, directly linked to the Covid 19 Vaccine.

But there are other things to pray through, which are linked, by co-incidence (God Incidence?) to what I've been talking about:

Do we have something which God might be nudging us to use for his bigger purposes? Something which in his hands, could reach way beyond our own quite small understanding?

So, I close with a question, which is really a prayer:

“All things come from You” (I Chronicles 29:14)

Lord, what am I holding on to, which you would really like back, to make it an even greater gift?

Amen.

