

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas**

**29<sup>th</sup> December 2024**

**All Saints' Marseille**

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A few years ago a British Prime Minister, David Cameron, was spending the weekend with his family at Chequers, his official residence outside London. They went to meet some friends for lunch in the local pub. After lunch everyone got into their cars and returned to Chequers, where it was discovered that Cameron's eight year old daughter Nancy was not with them. He and his wife had each thought she was with the other parent. A telephone call to the Plough Inn quickly confirmed she was still there, and fifteen minutes later the family were reunited. The story inevitably generated media comment – 'Prime minister responsible for safety of the nation forgets own daughter at pub', etc. But anyone acquainted with the Gospels might have been reminded of the twelve year old Jesus being left behind accidentally by his parents in Jerusalem, and that it happened even to them.

Today, the First Sunday of Christmas, the Church honours the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. Our readings take us into both the difficulties of family relationships and the complex interplay of faith and human belonging. They also highlight the similarities between the stories of Mary, mother of the boy Jesus, and Hannah, mother of the boy Samuel.

Hannah was a childless woman whose husband, Elkanah, loved her deeply. He had two wives, the other of whom had children and used to taunt Hannah about her childlessness when the family went on their annual pilgrimage to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. On one such visit, Hannah prayed for a son, promising God that if her prayer were answered she would bring him back to Shiloh to serve in the house of the Lord. Her prayer was answered, and she duly brought Samuel there to serve with the priest Eli. In our Old Testament reading, we heard the touching story of Hannah making a little robe for Samuel each year, watching him grow 'both in stature and in favour of the Lord and with all the people'. In time, Samuel's ability to recognise the call of God would lead him to anoint and proclaim David as Israel's greatest king.

There are echoes of Hannah's story in Mary's, not least in the songs each sings in response to their firstborn sons. Hannah's song, 'My heart exults in the Lord', is echoed in Mary's Magnificat in Luke's Gospel. Both speak of expectations of prosperity being turned upside down – the hungry fed and the rich sent empty away, of good news for the oppressed. In a few weeks' time, at Candlemas, we will hear how Mary in turn symbolically gives up her firstborn son in the Temple, paving the way for Israel to become a blessing to all the nations, as the prophets had foretold.

In the stories of both Hannah and Mary there is faithfulness: faithfulness of children, and of parents bringing children to the place where the faith of their ancestors was enacted. But there are differences as well. Hannah deliberately takes her son to the house of the Lord to leave him there. Mary intends to take him home, but he is left behind by mistake. Yet underneath the differences are similar disturbing currents. In verses which our lectionary leaves out, we see

Samuel's apprenticing to the priest Eli taking place in a context of threatening evil within Eli's own house, and it is Samuel who has to break the news of the judgment to come. When Luke, echoing the Samuel story, says that Jesus 'increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour', we can sense a foretaste of Jesus's own commissioning for the task Samuel was given, heralding God's word of justice in the teeth of opposition.

So if we look beyond this brief scene of an all too human family drama, we see a wider and deeper picture emerging. We find Jesus already in the Temple at Jerusalem at the time of Passover, as one day he will be again. In those four words – Jesus – Temple – Jerusalem – Passover - we see a story that both reaches back into Israel's past and forward into a Christian future.

The story of the twelve year old Jesus also offers a window onto his ambivalence towards his own family. Over the centuries the church has sanctified the Holy Family as somehow being a family with no problems. But the Gospel story shows tensions visible, both between Jesus and his family and background, and between competing demands of faith and family loyalty. We hear Mary saying: 'your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety', and Jesus replying, 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'. The changed capital letter reveals the tension in his belonging both to Joseph and to God. On other occasions where the tensions break out, we are not told of Mary's words, but we are left to imagine her heartbreak and loss as the story moves towards its tragic climax in Jerusalem. Jesus, however, is constantly moving the boundaries outwards – beyond family, village, nation and tradition. Out to the whole world, who will be changed by his story. There is profound cost to that -

to Jesus, to Mary, to Joseph and to their other children. But without their willingness to bear that cost, you and I would not be sitting here today.

How, then, are we to live out our faith? Writing to the Colossians, St Paul suggests ways we would live if we truly loved our neighbour as ourselves. We are to 'clothe' ourselves with the things he lists, especially love: showing compassion, including to those who have none; being kind, not just to those who are appreciative; being patient, even when we long for action or change; forgiving others, even those we thought we could never forgive. It is hard, but we can learn how to do it, learning also from one another.

Three other words in our Gospel reading are not there by accident. His distraught parents find Jesus in the temple 'after three days'. It's a tiny indication that, for all the heartache, all the anxiety, all the pain of the sword that will pierce his mother's heart, this story has an ending beyond anyone's imagining. For the climax of the Gospel is not the tragedy of the cross, but resurrection.

So, as we give thanks today for the Holy Family, let us pause to reflect on what it cost them as Jesus's vocation and ministry unfolded. Let us pause to reflect on what our own vocations (in the widest sense of what we devote our time and energy to) cost our own families. And, as another year turns, let us continue to give thanks for the mystery of the Incarnation, which through the events of Jesus and Temple and Jerusalem and Passover and their outworking across the centuries, allows you and me to discover our true belonging as daughters and sons of the one true God, to whom be honour and glory, dominion and might, now and through all eternity. Amen.