

Today is Mothering Sunday and we remember and give thanks for Mothers everywhere. For those who have loved and nurtured us both in the family we were born into and the family of the church to which we belong by grace.

We also need to remember those who for many different reasons find this day particularly difficult.

Blessing of flowers

Early in the first chapter of his Gospel, Luke recounts two parallel stories, one of the Annunciation to Mary, the other the

announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and his barren wife Elizabeth.

These accounts act as a link between the old and the new. In a society where women were valued solely for their ability to bare children, childless women were viewed as a useless burden to society and a disgrace. The readers of Luke's gospel when confronted with the story of Elizabeth would have been reminded of Israel's history. Of the barren Sarah who was past childbearing age and of God's promise to her husband Abraham that he would become the Father of nations. Of Hannah, who childless, pleaded

with God and became the mother of Samuel whose life was dedicated to God and became one of the great prophets of Israel.

It is Hannah who we are going to think about this morning

We heard her story in the first of our scripture readings. It is a story of distress and joy, of doubt and faith, of longing and fulfilment, of hope and perseverance.

The narrative sets the scene establishing that Hannah is the first of her husband Elkanah's two wives. It was quite customary and socially acceptable at the time, for men to have more than one

wife. The problem, we are told, is that Elkanah's second wife Peninnah had born him a number of children while Hannah was still childless. Worse still, Peninnah was very unkind and scoffed at Hannah, making fun of her childless state.

In her distress and despair Hannah prayed to God. Poor woman not only was she ridiculed and derided by Peninnah but when she came before God in anguished prayer, the priest mistakes her distress for drunkenness and reprimands her. Here is a lesson for all of us.

How easy it is, to prejudge a situation and react according to our initial perceptions.

How difficult, to accept that we have misjudged the circumstances, and make amends. Fortunately, Eli was a man who was gracious and compassionate and humble enough to acknowledge he had made a mistake and gives Hannah reassurance and hope.

We all need encouragement and in our darkest moments a kind word or even just a squeeze of the hand can enable us to get

through it and with God's grace see a distant light at the end of the dark tunnel.

However, we are told that Hannah didn't sit around just waiting for something miraculous to happen, she and her husband went home and went about their normal lives, and we are told that, "in due time" God answered Hannah's prayer, and she had a son whom they named Samuel.

But that isn't the end of the story.

Once Samuel was weaned Hannah fulfilled the vow she had made to God during her heartfelt pleading for a child, and she took him to the Temple with offerings of a bull, flour and wine and she presented him to Eli with the words “for this child I prayed and the Lord has granted me the petition I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord, as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord”, and she left him in the temple. I can’t begin to imagine what this action cost her.

But in the pain of parting Hannah’s response was to turn to God in prayer. We didn’t have it as part of this morning’s, Old Testament

reading but do look it up when you get home it can be found in the first 10 verses of chapter 2 in the first book of Samuel. As you read it notice the similarity to the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise following the annunciation.

Here is the reaction of a young woman saying "Yes" to God. Her yes was also to expose her to heart ache and pain.

Leaving Samuel in the Temple must have caused Hannah great pain and heart ache and she didn't forget him, each year when she and Elkanah went to the temple to offer the yearly sacrifice, she took a robe for him to wear. You can imagine it, each year it was a

little bigger to fit him as he grew. And each year Eli blessed them and prayed for them.

But that's still not the end of Hannah's story for she was not left bereft. Her faithfulness and piety were rewarded with three more sons and two daughters.

Hannah's story reminds us of God's provision, of faithful acceptance and the value of open, honest and trusting prayer to a faithful and loving God. It also emphasises that a life of faith does not mean that all will be smooth sailing.

Today is Mothering Sunday, the Church also calls it Laetare Sunday. Laetare means - Rejoice. Its origin goes back to the Roman Catholic Latin rite where the Introit at Mass set for this day begins with the word, "Laetare Jerusalem" - Rejoice, Jerusalem. And perhaps that sums up what this day in the middle of Lent is about.

It is about rejoicing, in the love of God which sent his son and that love which is reflected in human love especially in the love, care, and nurture of our mothers. It is about saying thank you to those who have given us life and made us what we are. And that

includes not only mothers AND of course fathers but all those who have influenced our lives for good who have helped us by their lives, words and actions, to understand a little bit of what God's faithful, unconditional loving care is like.