

Text: Exodus 20:12-21 and 1 Samuel 1:1-17

Theme: Prayer Series 2: And who am I?

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at Holy Communion Service on 09/10/2011 at 10.30am.

Last week, we saw from the opening statement of the Ten Commandments that prayer is not about us per se but about God. The focus must be on Him. He is the great 'I AM', the God who chose to love unworthy people like the Israelites, and me. Here in the Ten Commandments we see a rich portrait of God, who He is and what He does.

The commandments now progress to tell them (and us) that because we belong to Him, we should be like Him. If He values life, so must we. If He is reliable and trustworthy in relationships, how can we possibly be anything else? If He is holy, then we too must be pure in every aspect of our behaviour.

As you read the other half of the Ten Commandments, you see that it is a revelation, an exposure of us. Here we see the kind of people we are always in danger of being and becoming, but for the grace of God: idolatrous, ungrateful, irreverent, forgetful, indifferent to the working conditions of other people, disrespectful to parents, aggressive and violent towards those we dislike, lustful for things which belong to other people.

It is for this reason that some theologians have described God's law in the commandments as a looking-glass or mirror designed by God to show us ourselves as we really are and not as we might vainly imagine ourselves to be.

The commandments remind us that we are sinners. Our times for believing and dependent prayer are not occasions to parade our merits or assert our moral worth. They are moments when we are reminded of our immense need, when we recall with gratitude that we come to God in prayer so that, however our sin, we may be gloriously forgiven. I can't help but refer to Moses' audacity again at requesting God to take "these people as your inheritance" after referring to them as stiff-necked people and disobedient. What a bold request! It is childlike but bold. The God's child knows his position, recognises his Father and conscious of his calling, nothing is too big to discuss with his Father.

We shall never outgrow the need of childlike prayer for personal needs. Hannah's was a common problem in a society where men kept more than one wife (1 Samuel 1:1-17). Although she enjoyed more of her husband's love than her rival Peninnah, Hannah was barren. The mockery and gibes of her fertile rival, who would be surrounded in the household with her brood of offspring, made her husband's love a source of pain and bitterness to Hannah. Nothing hurt her more than the annual feast of tithes. Israelites had the custom of reserving one-tenth of their produce to offer to the Lord.

But for Hannah there was no joy. As Elkanah distributed God's portion of meat to his family he would load Peninnah's platter with large quantities of meat to divide among her young children. The single portion that Hannah received was a painful reminder of her barrenness. Peninnah lost no opportunity to rub salt in her rival's wounds.

One year Hannah left her food untouched. Tears welled from her eyes as she stared at the meat. Her appetite had gone. Even Elkanah's tender assurances of love could not lift the

load of depression that crushed her. Hannah's plight is touching. I often wish I could have watched Hannah's mobile lips framing silent words of longing as hour succeeded hour. Eli evidently did watch. Probably he frowned in irritation, turned away and came back to observe her several times. In the end his irritation overcame his discretion. "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." But Hannah was drunk with yearning, not with wine. "Not so, my lord, I am a woman who is deeply troubled; I have not been drinking wine or beer, I was pouring out my soul to the LORD (Note the capital letters). Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

"Deeply troubled...pouring out my soul to the LORD...speaking out of my great anguish and grief..." We do not need to know all she said. Her agonies are distilled into those three moving phrases. She could have spoken audibly, sobbed uncontrollably, lain on her face and groaned, moaned and swayed her body - but the message that pierced the heavens would have been the same. Longing is always understood clearly by God.

The point to notice is that it was directed longing, shot like an arrow from a bow at the target. Many people wring their hands and weep, but their weeping echoes hollowly through an empty universe ... or so it must seem to them. And so for all intents and purposes it might as well be. "Anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." (Hebrews. 11:6). Agony must be expressed to a God who is *there*. God hears all poured out agony, but he longs to be something more than a celestial pacifier. **He wants people in their suffering to run to him for He is himself the gift we really need.**

As Christians we often make two mistakes. We moan fluently to people around us. This may be the lesser evil. Friends can be counted on to take a certain amount of moaning. But we are to bring our grief to God, and it is here that we fail so lamentably. We come to Him. That is to say we exercise faith. We believe He is there, so to speak. We also believe that He can hear us. But our fear of God and our reverence for him inhibit us. Can the God of the heavens really care about my little affairs? (Does a mother care about a three-year old's scratched finger?)

If I knew how to make you tremble and quake in His presence I would. Indeed I pray the Holy Spirit may do just that for you. **But to tremble and to be struck dumb need not go together. Great as He is, He is also tender and gentle.** And since He is aware of the most subtle nuance of pain in our hearts we need not hide it from Him. We may even be angry or resentful toward him, but whether our resentment is justifiable or not, it is better expressed than hidden. (Those of you who have been studying Nehemiah with us will remember the way Nehemiah prayed when assailed with opposition both within and without (Nehemiah 4:6; cf. Psalm 58:6). Don't let it shock you, to see how horrendous your thoughts really are? Do not disguise them but confess them. Also tell Him of your hurts. Time is of no consequence. You may talk for hours since He dwells in eternity where time has no meaning. And know that when you pour out your heart to God like Hannah did, He will be listening intently, understanding profoundly.

Peace came to Hannah. Eli's words of comfort were God's way of telling her that He had heard. Weeks might pass before she became pregnant, but for her the issue was settled. My own experience has varied. At times peace that transcends my understanding has followed such an outpouring of my heart. God knows and that is enough. God knows, and sometimes I know the request has been answered, however long it may be before the heavenly parcel comes in the

mail. But there are other times when it is harder for me to know that peace. No flood of assurance flows through my limbs and lifts me to my feet.

I am asked, "Can you trust me?" "Yes, Lord," I will answer. "Then trust me and leave the matter with me. You know who I am." And with this I have to be satisfied. But with Hannah all was well - well for the deepest of reasons that Someone had heard and understood. And to know one is understood is to experience revolutionary changes within oneself. During the hours Hannah had spent pouring her heart out to God, great changes had come about in her. She was no longer the same woman who had refused to eat her portion of meat. She walked back to her family. She ate a hearty meal. Her eyes had a new light in them and a secret smile played about her lips. She was in pain. She prayed about her pain. God answered beyond all her expectations. Hannah took the initiative and God responded. Hannah's child was to be an unusual figure in history. Unusual circumstances were needed to produce such a man.

It was C. S. Lewis who once said that God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts to us in our pain. The same pain that produced a Samuel to transform Israel produced a transformed Hannah. If we could have talked with her ten years after the birth of Samuel (long before Samuel became a national figure), we would have found that she never ceased to sound the praise of God. She would laugh at the pain she earlier suffered because **the pain had driven her into the arms of God.**

I never know how one measures pain, but my heart swells with joy, a joy too great to express in words, at the thought of the trials my wife and I have gone through. Hannah was not a pawn in God's historical chess game. The silent cries of her desperation were the response to pressures He was placing on her. Personal suffering is never meaningless for the child of God. You may not know why you suffer, and your suffering may seem to you too painful to bear. Under such circumstances you must always bring your suffering to Him and let Him intervene. You may go further than Hannah and praise Him that you know He is trustworthy and concerned, however great the pain may be. You may know (because of Hannah's story) that God could have plans to do something through your pain that extends far beyond your own life and times. Will you trust Him?

A little boy was spending his Saturday morning playing in his sandbox. He had with him his box of cars and trucks, his plastic pail, and a shiny, red plastic shovel. In the process of creating roads and tunnels in the soft sand, he discovered a large rock in the middle of the sandbox. The lad dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With no little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox by using his feet. (He was a very small boy and the rock was very large.) When the boy got the rock to the edge of the sandbox, however, he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the little wall.

Determined, the little boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox. The little boy grunted, struggled, pushed, shoved - but his only reward was to have the rock roll back, smashing his chubby fingers. Finally he burst into tears of frustration.

All this time the boy's father watched from the living room window as the drama unfolded. At the moment the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy's father. Gently but firmly he said, "Son, why didn't you use all the strength that you had available?" Defeated, the boy sobbed back, "But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!"

“No, son,” corrected the father kindly. “You didn’t use all the strength you had. You didn’t ask me.” With that the father reached down, picked up the rock, and removed it from the sandbox.

Do you have “rocks” in your life that need to be removed? Are you discovering that you don’t have what it takes to lift them? God is always available to us and willing to give us the strength we need to overcome obstacles and to accomplish great things for him. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1).