



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Holy Family-Year C-December 30th 2018-Wadebridge

Readings: 1 Samuel 1: 20-22 24-28, Psalm 83, 1 John 3: 1-2 21-24

Luke 2: 41-52

There is a suspicion that people who are too serious about religion are not quite right in the head. This is certainly an increasing prejudice in the western secular world. Whereas previously religious understanding was the very bedrock of our identity, culture, art and jurisprudence it is now assumed to be, by the more charitable, an emotional crutch for the needy as they seek consolation in the company of their 'imaginary friend' in the sky. Among the less charitable it is regarded as a form of intellectual backwoodsmanism and a brake on the progress of Man, a dangerous and unscientific superstition.

An extreme example of this came to my attention very early in my ministry on my visits to the old lunatic asylums. As the nurses were never in uniform, they looked exactly the same as the patients, usually equally unkempt and chain smoking the same fags. The only way you could tell the difference was this. On entering the ward in clerical attire, the nurses would mysteriously vanish, unhappy to encounter a representative of a different form of healing. The lunatics would queue up to talk to you about God. The obvious conclusion was that religion was indeed for the mad. But it was not that simple. Usually those sectioned and restrained and subjected to chemical or electrical violence by the mandate of the

State, (exorcism is mild compared with these state sanctioned ‘cures’) were on or over the edge of endurance and were desperate to reconnect with a greater reality and regain a stability and purpose that had eluded them and had led to their breakdown in the first place.

They were Man - in extremis of the soul, crying out for love and healing. Of course it is not just the secularists that harbour this prejudice about the mental instability of the religious mind. On a much smaller scale, my own return to the Faith encountered a suspicious welcome. In my early twenties I went into a large city church where, amazingly and just like the television but never in reality, the Vicar was pottering about. I approached him and asked if he did lessons in Christianity as I had recently had a spiritual experience that led me to the Faith. I have seldom seen a man disappear up the aisle at such a speed. He mumbled something about ‘confirmation classes’ – but ‘you wouldn’t want that’ before heading for the safety of the sacristy. Months later, when I was the only survivor of his confirmation classes, he admitted to me that he assumed, from my interest in religion and talk of ‘religious experience’, that I was a ‘nutter’. (I should add that he has not been the last liberal clergyperson to draw that conclusion).

Which, in a long meandering fashion draws me round to this morning’s Old Testament reading and the story of Hannah, mother to be of Samuel, the great Prophet of early Israel.

You will recall the preamble to this morning’s edit. Hannah, the favourite of Elkanah’s two wives, (these were the days when men had the energy and means for such luxuries), was barren while the other wife kept reproducing at will. Hannah was in great distress and permanent turmoil about her misfortune. On the pilgrimage to the great shrine at Shiloh she had poured out her heart to God before the altar with evident emotion. The High Priest had witnessed this unseemly display and decided that no-one got that intense about religion and Hannah must be drunk. With true pastoral sensitivity he advised, in short order, to get lost and sober up.

When Hannah explained her grief, the embarrassed priest blessed her and joined her prayer that she would become a mother. That prayer was granted. The upshot was Samuel – a name from the Hebrew word ‘to hear’ – because the Lord heard her. What the high priest, Eli, could not have foreseen is that when next she would return to Shiloh she would hand over this precious child to be brought up by the priests of the shrine, returning his life to God.

Between them the two men, Eli and Samuel, would have a massive influence on the future of the people of God. It is a remarkable story. Both these men’s families would be routinely unfaithful to God yet they themselves would be fundamental to the institution of the royal family, the line of David.

What can we learn from all this. There are a dozen sermons loitering in this passage – so just a few pointers.

Our prayer lives are ordered by the beauty of the liturgy, Mass and offices. But they do not end there. Personal heartfelt prayer before the altar of God is untidy, sometimes emotional – it is part of a real relationship with a real Father. We should not be surprised by our tears when we are heart to heart with Him.

Priests don’t always get it right. Hannah could have walked away and said, ‘I’m never coming to church again because that priest was so rude.’ She doesn’t. She explains the source of her grief and the engine of her prayer. Immediately he understands the old priest does his job, praying with her and blessing the intentions of her heart.

Holiness is not genetic. Both Samuel and Eli will have sons who are unfaithful to God. Many older Christians beat themselves up because their children have lapsed and maybe there are ways in which we have failed to teach and example the Faith. But each man must make his own decision, and many have walked away because it is the easier thing to do in a society that regards religion as a mental aberration. That great

hinterland of the lapsed will be in our prayers and the wellspring of our tears until the day we die – and perhaps it would do no harm to say that to them from time to time.

Those who walk the borderlands of God and Man are not ‘normal’, their experiences of the divine reveal life and love and human history in a cosmic context of supercharged reality. Who would hanker after normality after that?

To the world we are fools for Christ’s sake - St Paul said that.

Did we really think we would be any different?