



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B-January 17th 2021

***Readings: 1 Samuel 3: 3-10. 19, Psalm 39, 1 Corinthians 6: 13-15. 17-20,
John 1: 35-42***

When I was a little boy we all knew what a family looked like. We knew because we were one and we were a 'NORMAL' family. Actually, of course, we weren't. It takes time and experience to realise that and become aware of the serious lunacies that were taken for granted in our house. But we qualified in that there was a Mum and a Dad and two children and nothing too horrific.

When you get married, of course, you discover that someone else's household does not run on quite the same lines as yours. You learn what to keep and what to ditch. You learn from your forebears the good things to do as well as the things you promise yourself you will never do.

Come the great cultural revolution of the 1960s onward and no family was considered normal. Families could be made up of whatever, whoever, whenever. Even to write children's books about a 'normal' family was considered judgemental and repressive and reactionary. School libraries were duly purged of such terrible and complacent offerings. Life was to be represented as broken, angst-filled, feral, often fatherless. The State, in true Marxist tradition, was to supersede the

parents' role in the most intimate levels of education and medication and control. Social engineering abounded and still does. Listen to the BBC.

Of course, in the Judeo- Christian tradition, we recognise that all families do not look alike. There is great emphasis on the care of the widow and the orphan, the abandoned and the displaced. Families may be reconfigured by war, widowhood, divorce, betrayal, sudden death and the utterly unforeseeable.

Nonetheless there remains a central significance for the roles of both mother and father, the latter much despised and disregarded by the new cultural soviet.

Today we encounter a very, very odd family scenario indeed.

You will remember Hannah, Elkanah's desperate barren wife, who turned up at the great shrine at Shiloh, and prayed and wept so hard that the High Priest Eli thought she was drunk. (Classic priestly reaction – serious praying nutter alert).

Well, as we know, once Eli had got the pastoral hang of the situation, he was quite sympathetic and prayed with Hannah. Though I doubt whether he realised the full import of her prayers for him and his family.

True to her promise, the Lord being gracious to her, she waited a couple of years – until the child was weaned – before presenting her longed for toddler at the cathedral presbytery. Samuel, for it was he, was literally given back to the Lord and into the household of Eli who, already had a couple of sons to his name. Hannah and Elkanah would ship up annually with some new clothes for the lad along with the five other sproglings that Hannah conceived after Samuel had broken her duck. Eli and his wife would bless them all and keep training the child of God's gift. Normal it wasn't. But into this family Samuel came.

At the far end of all this Samuel would end up as the determinative prophet and effective king maker of early Israel, while Eli's own sons used the privilege of their father's office to line their own pockets.

What distinguishes Samuel from very early on – and to his credit Eli recognises this – is his openness to God's Word. Samuel hears God speak to him very clearly and, though terrified by what he has heard, he acts upon it.

In today's passage we hear the night time encounter but not the content. As so often in the modern lection there is a mind numbingly stupid edit which avoids the whole purpose of the story. Samuel listens to the Lord and the Lord tells him that, because of their crookedness, Eli's sons will die and so will Eli who has failed to discipline them and reign them in. The House of Eli will fall. What Samuel doesn't know is that he will be confirming something that another prophet has already told Eli. When Eli forces the frightened boy to tell him what the Lord has said, he knows that it is true. His response is simply one of resignation. It is almost an echo of the Annunciation – 'Let the Lord do what seems good to Him.'

Shortly thereafter the battle with the Philistines goes horribly awry. The Ark of the Covenant is lost, the sons, Hophni and Phineas are killed and Eli, old and fat and blind, topples off his chair in shock and breaks his neck. Samuel, the toddler in the temple, the gift boy, the faithful listener to God emerges as the prophet who will become the Judge of Israel for the rest of his life and, in due course, the kingmaker.

But this is clearly not an episode of 'Happy Families'. The Bible doesn't do much of that. Ruth and Boaz and Zechariah & Elizabeth maybe. But set that against the fratricidal strife of Cain and Abel, the strange domestic habits of Abraham, the fate of Joseph at the hands of his jealous siblings, the graceless divorce of Moses, the disgraceful behaviour of David, arranging a friend's murder so he could get his wife. There's a lot of odd and often unedifying stuff. All of which does two central things.

We know it's true because it's not a series of hagiographies. It's real life, real people, real mess, real families. Second we notice that the constant theme of the faithful sinner. The key people return again and again to God. They have in common that, underlying all their failure and sinfulness, there is still a priority of the desire to serve God and be obedient to His Word. What matters for Samuel is not the oddity of his family life but, in the end, that he has God for his Father and all else pales into insignificance.

What we all here have in common is not the perfect upbringing BUT the fact that we are children of God, brothers and sisters of the company of Jesus Christ with the Church as Mother, modelled on that remarkable and glorious woman from another strange family set-up – Our Lady, supreme listener to the Word of God and thus the chosen bearer of Him into the world.