

26th Sunday 12th of Luke Prophets 3 Hannah

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
Delivered on December 24, 2006

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is among us!

This weekend the Church commemorates the Prophetess Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, and today as part of our series of Prophets we shall turn our attention to Hannah as Prophetess. Her commemoration is linked hand in hand with another prophetic fulfillment in the conception of the Virgin Mary by Joachim and Anna. Just as Hannah's birth to Samuel led the way to his anointing of the first Kings of Israel, so too Anna's conception of the Theotokos prefigures the coming of the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. There are several things we can learn from the story of Hannah.

The first thing is that it expands our understanding of what it means to be a prophet. As we looked at Obadiah and Zephaniah we saw very traditional images of prophets: the stern correctors of the unfaithful, speaking the word of God, the true author of the Biblical books attributed to their names. Hannah is a prophet not only by her word but also by deed and type. As the mother of the great prophet Samuel, she is a proto-type of Anna, the Mother of Mary, the Mother of God, but also of the Theotokos as well. But perhaps most of all, Hannah is an image for all of us, a very human, very sympathetic character in whom we can see both the power of human sorrow but also the power of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. We are told the story in 1 Samuel:

¹Now there was a certain man ... and his name *was* Elkanah ... ²And he had two wives: the name of one *was* Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ³This man went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh... ⁴And whenever the time came for Elkanah to make an offering, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb.

⁶And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat.

The story of Hannah may at first seem like a fairy-tale to us, but it is very true to life. For even though we do not find this kind of polygamy in the Christian world, (though it still exists among other religions), we probably can all identify this kind of family dynamic. That dynamic is favoritism. Elkanah had two wives, but in truth, he only loved one of them: Hannah. This engendered jealousy in his other wife, Penninah, who gave Hannah nothing but grief, so that she could not even enjoy a single portion of what she had been given. So even though, she was favored, as a result, she received less than if she had not been. This is a lesson for us, whether we are treated with favor or if we are favoring others. We may in the end be causing a net loss for the one we love.

Especially at this time of Christmas, there is always a delicate balancing act of gift-giving in which we want to make sure our family members receive suitable but equitable treasures, so that they know that we love them. It is not as easy as it sounds, right? And if we don't care about this, and openly show favoritism, we can really begin to create strife in our families. Some families will permanently schism from favoritism. Brothers and sisters will squabble and hate one another. God forbid when the time comes when the favoring parent passes away and the estate is divided. Each item becomes symbolic of something far greater—symbolic of the love that the child is still seeking after, even in their adult years. Even the favored child may experience this because the love they received through favoritism was an unhealthy love, one that could not bring them joy, just as Hannah had no joy in her double portion. In her case, of course, it was a favoring husband. Elkanah did not realize the fruit of his unhealthy love: ⁸Then Elkanah her husband said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is

your heart grieved? *Am I not better to you than ten sons?*” The answer is, “Umm, actually, No!” By his favoritism, he made himself self feel better, no doubt, but he was making her life miserable. Thus we must always watch ourselves, that even our seemingly good deeds are not a cause for evil.

⁹So Hannah arose after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the tabernacle of the LORD. ¹⁰And she *was* in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. ¹¹Then she made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.”

Hannah’s prayer here is very interesting if we think about it. Her problem is that childless, she suffers at the hands of the second wife. Having a child will remove that burden from her, for then Elkanah will not have grounds to give her the double portion. Yet her vow is that should she have the child, she will give him to the Lord, and as we shall see, that means he will be raised in the house of the priest Eli to lead a religious life. In the end, she will still be alone. It’s possible that we could impute a selfish motive to her in dedicating the child to the Lord. But if we look more closely, we see that she will understand this gift from God in a different light.

¹²And it happened, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli watched her mouth. ¹³Now Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, “How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!” ¹⁵And Hannah answered and said, “No, my lord, I *am* a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶“Do not consider your maidservant a wicked woman, for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I have spoken until now.” ¹⁷Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.” ¹⁸And she said, “Let your maidservant find favor in your sight.” So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

Hannah shows us the nature of her character. Her soul is humble. She does not wish to make a show of her grief, so she prays quietly in her heart, only mouthing the words. She pours out her soul before the Lord. She does not even tell the priest Eli what it is she is praying for—she does

not think herself so important that she should do so. And receiving the blessing, she departs in peace, finally able to eat again, no longer sad. In this she is a model of suffering with faith.

¹⁹Then they rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned and came to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, *saying*, “Because I have asked for him from the LORD.” ²¹Now the man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and his vow. ²²But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “*Not* until the child is weaned; then I will take him, that he may appear before the LORD and remain there forever.” ²³And Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the LORD establish His word.” So the woman stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

We can note that the child here brings in a new element for her. It gives her an excuse to not go up to Shiloh for the dreaded affair which in the past has always been a source for Penninah’s jealousy. It distances her from Elkanah as well, who must now spend some time with the other wife and show her the kind of favor he usually reserved for Hannah for the year or two of Samuel’s nursing. We can almost hear the new sense of things in the curtness of his words: “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the LORD establish His word.” Perhaps he is not too well-pleased in this turn of affairs. Perhaps this bold move of faith on her part will cool the man’s favoring love and bring harmony to the family. The Lord has lent her a gift, and now she will give the child back. Elkanah must understand that he is not given the real credit for this child.

²⁴Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child *was* young. ²⁵Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli. ²⁶And she said, “O my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I *am* the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. ²⁷“For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him. ²⁸“Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD.” So they worshiped the LORD there.

After this we do not hear much of what happened to Hannah, Penninah and Elkanah and their family life. We know that Hannah continued to conceive and bear at least five more children,

because “Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “The LORD give you descendants from this woman for the loan that was given to the LORD.” But the whole affair seemed to bring balance to their lives. Hannah’s faith and wisdom shows us that a healthy love is fair, balanced and reciprocal. As the Lord “lent” her the child, so she too will lend him back to the Lord, and love will be satisfied. And in her joy for having found the love of God, she offers words of prophecy which now have double-meaning:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD;
My horn is exalted in the LORD.
I smile at my enemies,
Because I rejoice in Your salvation.
2 “No one is holy like the LORD,
For *there is* none besides You,
Nor *is there* any rock like our God.
3 “Talk no more so very proudly;
Let no arrogance come from your mouth,
For the LORD *is* the God of knowledge;
And by Him actions are weighed.
4 “The bows of the mighty men *are* broken,
And those who stumbled are girded with strength.
5 *Those who were* full have hired themselves out for bread,
And the hungry have ceased *to hunger*.
Even the barren has borne seven,
And she who has many children has become feeble.
6 “The LORD kills and makes alive;
He brings down to the grave and brings up.
7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
He brings low and lifts up.
8 He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the beggar from the ash heap,
To set *them* among princes
And make them inherit the throne of glory.
“For the pillars of the earth *are* the LORD’s,
And He has set the world upon them.
9 He will guard the feet of His saints,
But the wicked shall be silent in darkness.
“For by strength no man shall prevail.
10 The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken in pieces;
From heaven He will thunder against them.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth.
“He will give strength to His king,

And exalt the horn of His anointed.”

In this we find the spirit of the Nativity story pre-figured. The Anointed King of Kings is Christ!