

**Comments**      **Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 15, 2009**

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

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**1 Samuel 1:4-20**

NRSV

In the time before the monarchy, Elkanah is on his annual pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh. He has taken his two wives and Peninnah's children with him. There he participates in a sacrificial meal. God has made Hannah childless (v. 5b); in spite of this, Elkanah "loved her" and gave her "a double portion" of food and drink. "Her rival" (v. 6), Peninnah (v. 4), has taunted her over her barrenness for many years. In spite of her husband's love and considerate attitude towards her, she has reached the point where she can take it no longer.

This year, after the meal, Hannah goes to the entrance of the temple, where she meets Eli, the priest. (The Jerusalem Temple was yet to be built.) She prays to God and makes a vow: if God will grant her a son, she will make him a "nazirite" (v. 11), a person dedicated (consecrated) to God who will refrain from drink, and not allow his head to be shaved. A first-born son was always dedicated to God, but Hannah offers more: (1) he will be a nazirite *throughout his life*, and (2) a first-born son was not expected to go as far as becoming a nazirite. Prayer was usually aloud, so Eli (knowing that all have been drinking) thinks Hannah's silence in prayer is because she is drunk (vv. 13-14). She answers him very coherently (vv. 15-16). Eli realizes his error of judgement, and intercedes with God on her behalf (v. 17). She trusts in God to grant her wish (v. 18). After returning home, Samuel is born to her and Elkanah. Hannah does fulfill her promise. When Samuel is weaned, she takes him to Eli in the temple and gives him to the Lord (v. 24). Samuel is God's gift to an oppressed woman; his life is God's gift, and in return his mother gives his life to God (vv. 27-28).

**1 Samuel 2:1-10**

NRSV

Hannah is leaving Samuel with Eli, but before heading home with Elkanah, she recites a prayer of thanksgiving. But look at vv. 9-10: what do these verses have to do with Samuel? Scholars agree that an editor has inserted a much later prayer into older material: the notions of guarding the faithful and cutting off (condemning) the wicked are post-exilic (after 450 BC). Notice "king" in v. 10: either this refers to the monarchy (which did not exist) or it is speaking of a future ideal king, a messiah. But look again: note "enemies" (v. 1), "victory", "adversaries" (v. 10). Hannah has at most one *enemy*, Peninnah. In Hebrew poetry, an individual ("I", v. 1) may speak on behalf of the nation: here Hannah speaks on behalf of Israel. At the time, Israel was a small struggling nation with powerful enemies. The editor makes a theological point: God controls the destiny of humankind in every age (v. 6); the story of Samuel is an example. Further, God reverses fortunes: see vv. 4, 5, 7 and 8. The number "seven" (v. 5) symbolizes completion and perfection, so Samuel is a perfect blessing from the Lord. Hannah is raised up

but Peninnah is brought low. God can do this because he is omnipotent; even the pillars on which the earth was thought to rest are God's.

**Hebrews 10:11-14,(15-18),19-25**

NRSV

The author has told us how much greater is Christ's sacrifice of himself than the annual sacrifices of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Now he says that what any priest offered daily in sacrificial ritual for the forgiveness of sins was worthless, unlike Christ's "single sacrifice" (v. 12): after Jesus died and rose, he became king. (Kings "sat down", but priests stood.) Since that time, he has been awaiting the final defeat of his "enemies" (v. 13). (The author does not say who they are.) For by offering himself on the cross he has "perfected" (v. 14), completed, the removal of sin from those whom God has "sanctified", made holy, set apart for his service. (Elsewhere salvation will be completed when Christ comes again.)

The writings of the Old Testament, divinely inspired through the "Holy Spirit" (v. 15), foretold this: Jeremiah wrote that there will be a new covenant, one in which God's ways will be written in peoples' very being (v. 16), and where God will, in effect, clean off the *sin slate* (v. 17). We have a new covenant (v. 18), a new deal with God. Vv. 19ff tell of the consequences of the new covenant: since Christ's sacrifice allows us to enter into God's presence ("sanctuary", v. 19) boldly, now that there is no longer a barrier ("curtain", v. 20) between the faithful and God, and since Christ is "a great [high] priest" (v. 21) who has sacrificed for the Church ("house of God"), we have three privileges/duties: we can and must (1) approach God in faith with clear consciences (v. 22); (2) "hold fast" (v. 23) to our statement of faith (made at baptism), reciprocating God's fidelity to us, and (3) stimulate the expression of "love and good deeds" (v. 24) in others. These duties must be performed in the context of the liturgical community, especially since "the Day" (v. 25, Christ's second coming), is approaching.

**Mark 13:1-8**

NRSV

Jesus has indicated to his disciples that the poor widow who gave all that she has is a good example of discipleship. We are nearing the end of his instructions to them.

In vv. 1-2, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple, as the prophets Micah and Jeremiah had done earlier. (His words were later used against him.) Did he mean it literally or figuratively? We don't know. (Both the Temple and the religious system were destroyed in 70 AD.) Then he and his first four disciples visit the Mount of Olives – a place mentioned in Zechariah 14:4 as being connected with events at the end of the era. They ask him: when will the Temple ("this", v. 4) be destroyed? How will we know that the end of the era is near? Jesus gives them three indicators: (1) false claimants to being God's agent of renewal will appear, claiming "I am he!" (v. 6); (2) international political conflicts (v. 8a) will occur, as will (3) natural disasters. There will be other signs too (vv. 14-25). The figure of a woman in labour ("birthpangs", v. 8) is also used in Jeremiah, Hosea and Micah.