

Christmas 1, 29th December 2024, Year C – Revd Dorienke de Vries

Readings: 1 Sam 2.18-20,26; Psalm 148; Col. 3.12-17; Luke 2.41-end - Ministry of healing

The story of little Samuel serving in the temple reminded me of another young child, that was sent by her parents to serve God in a monastery. Hildegard was the 10th child in a noble, medieval family; and as the youngest she was destined to become a nun. So at the age of 8 she was sent to the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, in Germany, where she would stay put until she was 52 years old. The stories about her give a fairly detailed account of her emotional and spiritual struggles. She wasn't exactly made for the life that she was forced to lead. Throughout her life her health was always fragile; being a sensitive person she also cried a lot.

Nothing is shared with us about Samuel's emotional state. Even before he was conceived, his mother had vowed to dedicate him to the Lord. He must have been around 3 years old – most children were weaned at the age of 3 – when his mother took him to the temple and left him there, under supervision of the high priest Eli. We can only imagine how bewildered this little boy must have been. I'm sure his mother had done her best to explain the story of his birth, and the vow that she had made; but what can a 3 yr old understand of such matters? What they can feel and do feel is abandonment and home sickness. Especially because the loving presence of his mother was replaced by the unhealthy environment of Eli's dysfunctional family and the partly corrupted temple worship of that time.

And then we have the story of 12 year old Jesus in the temple – in a way the opposite of the two other ones! He would have loved to stay in his Father's house, and to have these wonderfully inspiring conversations about God and his Word on a daily basis; but it was not to be. His parents come looking for him and it seems he has no choice but to follow them back to Nazareth, far away from the city and the house of his heavenly Father.
What is the common factor in these stories?

Three young children, affected by the choices their parents make for them. Bound by social custom. Bound by a mother's vows and promises. Bound by the demands of parents and family obligations. It did not make their life any easier. Even where the stories don't tell us much, it is not hard to imagine the tears, the loneliness, the anxiety, the unfulfilled longings. We would have totally understood if their lives had been marked by resentment and grudges.

However – that is common factor number 2: there is nothing of that in any of these lives. Hildegard grew up to be a famous abbess, mystic, composer and visionary prophet in her own time, whose sermons and writings have inspired many people ever since. Samuel grew up and continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people; and he became a famous prophet, who led his people through tumultuous times towards the establishment of the monarchy and the royal house of David. Young Jesus too increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour, in preparation for his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom of God in word and deed. There is a wholeness, an integrity to these lives that is truly remarkable. The fact that they suffered because of their parents' decisions is undeniable. But somehow they were able to take it on board as they grew up; to adapt to the situation; to offer this life to God, this life in which they had had little or no say. And despite their pain, or maybe even because of their pain, theirs was a life that brought healing, guidance, wisdom and inspiration, and even salvation to countless people. As modern day people we find it hard to imagine that parents would make such radical decisions about their children's lives, even before their birth. We prefer to be in control ourselves, to decide for ourselves what we want to do with our lives.

This is, of course, an illusion, and we know that it is, if we're being honest. Looking back all of us can point out events and people that have deeply influenced our lives, and there was nothing we could

do about it. Some of these experiences were good and helpful, and we are deeply grateful for them. But the opposite can also be true. Things that have happened to us or have been said to us have left their mark. We have been hurt. Some of us carry trauma. Others struggle with long-term or even chronic health problems, either physically or mentally. The list of issues that we had or have no control over is endless.

We read these stories today in the context of the ministry of healing, that will later on be offered in this service. There is a lot we can say about healing in a church context. Some of you may have some experience with healing services in other denominations, and/or come with certain expectations or even worries about what is going to happen here.

This is why I wanted to focus on this wholeness of life and being. Whatever burden is dragging us down, whatever illness or trauma is blocking our hopes and dreams, whatever unfulfilled desire or longing is shedding silent tears in our hearts – this is the life we offer to God when we come for healing. This is the life we offer to him, asking to infuse it with his grace and light. This is the life we offer to him, asking him to work with it. We ask him not so much to *take away* our pain, but to *transform* it. To make our darkness a source of light, and our suffering a source of healing. In our brokenness we stand in solidarity with each other, and with the people around us. Like Hildegard. Like Samuel. Like Jesus.

Don't get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with the strong desire to be healthy and strong and energetic. There is nothing wrong with praying for this kind of healing. We may think that we could serve God better if only... But that is not for us to decide. We might prefer for God to kiss the pain away, like mummy did when we were 4 years old, so we could forget about it. God may still do so – it is for him to decide how to bless us today. Our responsibility is to take on board whatever is bothering us at the moment, whatever may have been bothering us for a very long time, and may still be bothering us tomorrow. It is our responsibility to offer it to God who can bring light out of darkness, healing out of pain and life out of death. Who can turn all our trials to gold and glory. So that like Hildegard, like Samuel and like Jesus, we ourselves may increase in wisdom and grow in divine and human favour. So that we in all our brokenness may lead whole and integrated lives to the glory of God.

Amen