

A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist, Christmas I, Year C
Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle
by the Dean, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

1 Samuel 2.18-20, 26; Luke 2. 41-52

Today our readings link the experience of Samuel as a young boy in the Temple, Paul's teaching to the church in Colossae about clothing themselves with love, and the story of Jesus staying behind in the Temple after a family pilgrimage.

The story of Samuel and the story of Jesus are directly linked by a common phrase or idea: 'Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people' and, in the gospel, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favour'.

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel are set at a time of great insecurity and yearning in the history of the people of Israel. Again and again Israel has been defeated, and occupied by its enemies, especially by the Philistines. With each set back their hope has been diminished. They have a deep need for someone who will be a strong and stabilizing influence – a leader whose values will be those of God. Hannah is destined to be the mother of this leader, Samuel is this man of God. As this week's reading begins she has already given her son to God. She has done this not merely as an act of renunciation but also as an act of hope. The story of Jesus and the story of Samuel are also linked through the presence in each of a mother who is willing to give up her son for God's purposes. Hannah believes Samuel will renew the relationship between the people and God. Samuel will cleanse the worship of God from the corruption and selfishness displayed by Eli's sons (1 Sam. 2:12-17).

The boy Samuel is described as wearing an ephod. An ephod is a garment worn by priests and fastened around the waist: something like a minimalist apron or skirt with braces.¹

When David brings the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem we are told: 'David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod.' (2 Samuel 6.14).

'The little robe' that Hannah makes every year is a symbol of her enduring love for Samuel and he wears it beneath the priestly garment, the ephod.

The little robe symbolises Samuel's growth in faith and knowledge. He has not begun with all the wisdom and understanding he needs for God's work. He must learn. Each year as he grows out of the linen robe, he is given a new and bigger one, a symbol of his growing maturity as man of God.

A further link between Samuel's story and that of Jesus is that it was Samuel who would later anoint David as Israel's divinely chosen king. From David's line was born the child destined to be 'Son of God', as we hear in the message of the angel to Mary in Luke's gospel: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' (Lk. 1:26-38).

The story of Samuel told in 1 Samuel 2 is a story of growth and development, and of preparation for a divinely appointed destiny. That growth takes place, so this account tells us, in the context of both a family and a worshipping community. The piety of both the family of Samuel and the family of Jesus is indicated by their regular pilgrimage to the shrine or the Temple. Luke presents both home and temple as formative institutions in the

¹ Cheyne and Black, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*

development of Jesus. The family of Jesus is a model of Jewish piety. At every point in Jesus' life the laws of Moses have been kept: circumcision (2.21); Mary's purification and Jesus' dedication (2.22-44) and now the family's annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover (2.41)

In Jewish culture, as a twelve year old, Jesus has reached the age to accept adult religious responsibility. Here we see that for Jesus this does not simply mean religious observance but a deep engagement with teaching. The activity of Jesus in the Temple is to be among the teachers; throughout Luke's gospel that, rather than participating in sacrificial worship, is what Jesus does in the Temple.

Teaching the teachers is precisely the activity of Jesus that Luke emphasises at the climax of Jesus' ministry. From chapter 20.1-45 Jesus responds to the questions put to him in the Temple precincts by the Jewish leaders, and this activity Luke calls 'teaching in the Temple'. That same activity is continued by Jesus' prophetic successors in the Acts of the Apostles, who '... much annoyed [the Jewish leaders] because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.' (Acts 4.2) Later, when the disciples are released from prison, they return to this ministry immediately: 'Then someone arrived and announced, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!' (Acts 5.25)

We are told that Jesus increased in wisdom and years. This growth in moral as well as intellectual stature is something that is called for in all Christians. Paul, in Galatians 1.14 recounts that 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors', while in 1 Timothy 4.15, he urges Timothy: 'Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress.'

The favour and grace enjoyed by Jesus with both God and humans as a result of this growth is applied to the whole Christian community of Jerusalem in Acts who were : '...praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2. 47).

Both the story of Samuel in the sanctuary at Shiloh and Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem stress the need of growth in faith, growth that is seen in terms of understanding and practice. We as Jesus' disciples in every age need to seek to grow in our faith – in favour both with God and humanity. Faithful service to God is a slow journey of growth and learning with aspects of loss and vulnerability along the way; but it is also about growing into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Joseph and Mary travel in what the Greek text calls a 'synodia', their group, a pilgrimage party made up of relatives and neighbours from the same village.