

## **The Voice of the women**

Last time I stood up here, you allowed me to speak about two or three of the Minor Prophets, and at that time, I lamented that my subjects were all men, and I promised you something more, about the women. So, here we now are. Lets look together at the prophetic voice of women.

And I'm doing that against a background of this church becoming more and more a place of welcome, and ourselves being more and more in tune with God's will, as we work to be people of prayer.

There are lots of women in our Bible. They start with Eve, and move through 149 different women.

I have picked out three as our focus today: Deborah, Hannah and Huldah.

The order in which I have identified my three women is their order of appearance in our Bibles and it is the chronological order in which they appear in human history. But I'm going to leave Hannah until last.

+

So, first, **Deborah**

We meet Deborah in the Book of Judges. (Judges chapters 4 and 5)

Now Judges is a collection of old folk tales of heroes. The stories belong within the period when – according to the Hebrew folk myths – the nation was not yet formed as a nation, but was a loosely related collection of Semitic tribes, scattered across Palestine. This is perhaps thirteen hundred years before Christ. And the stories in Judges usually concern one or two of the tribes that later became Israel.

The repeated theme is that this group becomes oppressed by some petty tyrant, and then God sends a hero to beat up the tyrant and restore freedoms. The status of the hero is recognised to be one that gives what we would call legal decisions, so he or she is labelled a “judge” and the Book gets its name.

In this story, the tribes are Naphtali and Ephraim, in the north. And the oppressor is Sisera, some local brigand engaged in murder and pillage.

The key bits of the story are that Deborah galvanises the local militia into action, kicking life into their commander, and making the strategic and tactical decisions that end up with Sisera being nailed – literally. His deserved death is effected by another women, Jael.

But look at Deborah. At the start, what is she doing? She is already “Judging”. She is already a leader, an authority, acknowledged as such.

*“Now Deborah, a prophetess.... was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgement”. (4 vv 4-5)*

And she is a Prophet. So, she is seen as speaking for God to the people – you remember our definition of a Prophet from last year. She can say, *“The Lord, the God of Israel commands you, Go”*. (4 v 6)

Deborah therefore is already the local leader. How had she reached that position? What had she already done? Who knows? And we are not told. Why? I suspect this is because she is a woman. Her earlier record is unrecorded. But now, because of the scale of her achievement, her story cannot be ignored.

But it does have its *“she’s-just-a-girl”* moment. Barak, the militia leader says ‘I’m not going just because **you** say so, if you are so clever you come and smack Sisera’. After all, their enemy has several chariots of iron! Silly Barak. Thereafter, who ever has heard of **him**?

Because it is Deborah that the warriors follow. The obedience given to her leadership is total. *“Gather your men at Mount Tabor”*, she says to Barak (4 v 6) and *“Up, for this is the day...”* It is she who is making the military decisions.

When its all over, there is a party! Deborah is the star. If you sing, remember Deborah. She was a singer. Chapter five is her song. This is an old, old song. Actually, it shows signs of a cobbling together of even older songs, in the plural. It’s old material and confused.

Whatever, the lyrics of the song are interesting. Essentially its *“Hooray for the Israelites!”*. Lets just look at it. It describes the effects of Sisera’s oppression. Trading had ceased, travellers were avoiding the main roads, farmwork was not being done. (vv 6-7) There are three women featured in it. The first is Deborah herself. The second is Jael, the killer of Sisera, now *“most blessed of women”*. (Perhaps, for us, *amongst the blessed* maybe, because we know another, but it is worth noting that she is not an Israelite, even though *“most blessed”*.) The third woman is the mother of Sisera, who shares the grief of the mothers of dead soldiers.

The key feature is that it is God that has delivered. That it happened as it did, *“bless the Lord”* (v 2). *“To the Lord, I will sing”*, (v 3) because Lord, when you went forth it all happened..... And then, look at this, *“So, perish all thine enemies, O Lord! But thy friends will be like the sun as he rises.”* (v 31) This is prophetic language, words beginning that tradition that we see in the later Prophets. – Amos, Hosea, et al. It is starting here, in – what? the thirteenth century before Christ, long before their time - And who is voicing it? Deborah. And Deborah is a woman.

You are entitled to ask, what became then of this female prophetic voice?

+

So, lets get to Huldah

Second Book of Kings Chapter 22. Huldah. Who, you say? And that's my point today really. From our Bibles, the female prophetic voice is being written out.

Huldah's story appears in the middle of the seventh century BC. So six hundred years or so after Deborah. The Israelites have settled and now have Kings. Amos and Hosea have come and gone. There are perhaps three generations to go before the captivity, the exile, and the end of the monarchy in Jerusalem.

So, again, see the people worshipping fertility deities in various shrines, and their religious practices reflecting the dominance over their whole culture of the regional superpower, Assyria.

King Josiah has begun a national revival, and at the core of this was the need to re-establish the Hebrews' unique religion, to get for it again a hold upon the people's belief. Josiah stages an interesting fiction. An ancient book of the Law is found "hidden away". It was probably the book we call Deuteronomy.

Huldah was a scholar of high social rank in the small world of the Jerusalem elite. Her name, *Huldah* means *one who burrows, in the sense of digging*. Scholars burrow, they seek out knowledge. Huldah was perhaps like this.

Anyway, on finding the book, Josiah realizes that his people are a long way from where he wants them. To his top men, the King says, "*Go and enquire of the Lord for me, .....*" (22 v 13) So "*they went to Huldah the Prophet....*" (22 v 14) These top men in Jerusalem run straight away to Huldah. So, here is Huldah already acknowledged as a Prophet, one who is speaking for God. Such is her authority that she is the first source to which they turn for guidance.

As a result of Huldah's advice, Josiah progresses a relentless reformation. He seeks to recover the covenant relationship. Huldah's words encourage him, because she says that Josiah himself will not see the awful judgment of God. So perhaps a generation can pass in peace.

However, she is uncompromising in saying that the Kingdom is doomed. "*My wrath will be kindled against this place*" – presumably Jerusalem. Why? "*Because they have forsaken me and have worshipped other gods.*" And the judgment comes from the Covenanted God, the special protector.

If this all sounds familiar, you are right. Last summer we were looking at almost identical words in Amos, in Hosea. It is a direct echo of their message. It is more of the same, yes. But the messenger is different, and she is chiefly different in her sex. Given the male dominated society that produced our Bible, is it not remarkable that Hildah makes it into the record at

all? Yes, it is, and the fact that she does so emphasizes her truly very remarkable character. Here she is, dominating in a man's world.

But, there is no book of the oracles of Huldah, as there is of the oracles of Amos, of Hosea, of Isaiah. Why not? How many of you can say that, before today, you had heard of Huldah? She's been written out. Can we ask ourselves whether, since her day, the situation that led to her eclipse has really changed? Huldah is our second woman to make the point.

I am going to put in a health warning at this point. Deborah had a husband, Lappidoth; Huldah had a husband, Shallum. Despite the editors of Second Kings' attempt to big up Huldah's husband, he is irrelevant to the story. Deborah's husband is also merely a footnote. So, nothing here says that to be the instrument of God you need a husband, a lover or a boyfriend. And note, too that there are single women in the Bible, important women: Mary the Magdalene, the two sisters of Lazarus, just as examples.

But sometimes, God uses the state of matrimony. So, lets look at.....

+

## **Hannah**

In our Bible Hannah is a mother. The mother of Samuel. Samuel who created the Davidic monarchy. Samuel means *requested of God*. (I Samuel I v 20)

So, first book of Samuel, chapter one. Back in time from Huldah perhaps four or five hundred years.

Before she is a mother, Hannah is a devoted wife. And the story shows us her household. We can see that it is a ménage-a-trois – and some of you may find that a difficulty – but this is not a time illuminated by our rules about marriage. This is Palestine a thousand years before Christ. This husband has two wives and, according to the Bible here, nothing then wrong about that.

It says something for the sexism of the society that they lived in that Hannah is ashamed. She's ashamed that she has no child. This is a great sorrow and grief. It gives the second wife, Penninah, with whom she shares her husband, a stick to beat her with.

Why is Hannah so devoted? Perhaps because she has a husband who adores her. The Bible shows real tenderness between Hannah and her man. He tells her he loves her. A lesson there for the blokes. Hannah's man says to her, it doesn't matter, this no baby-thing. You have me, he says, and I adore you.

But it does matter.

Now Leviticus – that is, their law, because Leviticus wasn't written in Hannah's time - tells the Hebrews that the first-born always belongs to God. Any first born. Hannah makes a vow. If God removes the shame, and she gives birth, then the child will literally be given to God.

And he is. He is given to a Priest. Just imagine that. We weep when at four or five years old we first put our children into the nursery for three hours. Hannah gives this little person, separates herself from him, totally, when little Samuel is a toddler! My goodness, what a weepie!

Look at what Hannah does. She goes every year to see her child and each year she gives him a new little coat. Are you crying yet? You should be! Cry for Hannah. What a hero.

What is the Bible saying? First, it is saying that it is the girls who conceive and bear a child, and care for the child : and that this is **the** most honourable occupation. For the child comes from God. It is God who unlocks Hannah and allows the pregnancy.

Hannah prays, "Lord, *give thy maidservant a son ....*" It is the words of Eli, "*Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition....*" that makes the change. We read that Hannah then "*ate and her countenance was no longer sad.*" (*1 Samuel I v 11, 17-18*)

So, a lesson in prayer. "*For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him*". And Hannah goes on to have with her husband three sons and two daughters. So, no more bullying from the other wife, I think.

So what more is the story telling us? Isn't it that God consecrated Hannah, and the child. And that is not a lesson confined to Hannah and her child. God can make sacred the uniquely female actions of child-bearing and child rearing. God acted in giving the child, God does so still, if we care to see it. Doesn't it follow that those uniquely female actions are the very highest of high vocations. And if they are so high, consecrated by God, what values do we place upon them? What value does our society place upon them?

Finally, Hannah sings. "*My heart exults in the Lord*". (2 v 1) Where have we heard that before? Why, compare St Luke's Gospel, chapter one verse 46 when another woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus, sings, "*My soul magnifies the Lord.*" Hannah's song praises God, piling up glory upon glory, "*There is none holy like the Lord, there is none beside Thee; there is no rock like our God*" (v 2) Like Mary, she contrasts the before and after position, "*those who were hungry have ceased to hunger..... He raises up the poor from the dust, he lifts the needy from the ash heap.*" It is a song of faith, "*He will guard the feet of his faithful ones.*" Why does she sing so? Verse 5. "*The barren woman has born seven.....*"

Above all, Hannah's song is a song of God's ultimate triumph, "*The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; against them will He*

*thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to His king, and exalt the power of His Anointed."*

Now, of whom does she sing? To which Anointed does she refer?

Hannah's world had no King, and we, coming later even than the editor of the Book of Samuel know that we have to go and hear Mary sing a similar song. "*For God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden, for behold from henceforth all generations will call me blessed, for He who is mighty has done great things for me...*" It is in Mary's child that the anointed one becomes clear.

+

OK. So .... three women. Deborah: for those of you who are shakers and movers, a person of action. Huldah: for those who can speak for God, teachers, developers, amongst the great prophets. And Hannah: for those who are mothers and carers.

I have not said that these three roles are mutually exclusive. You can be all three. Nor have I said that these three are the only women role models in our Bible. Remember Mary the Magdalene and those sisters of Lazarus. You can be single. You can be a widow. God has lessons for us in our Bibles from them all. And when we look at Ruth, I'll make that point again.

Now, why do I say all this to you? Someone will say that I'm focussing in an unbalanced way upon the women. Someone else will mention Saint Paul. But .... you know ..... if you really want to address the issue of injustice and unfairness, you need to go the extra mile with the disadvantaged group. You need to act in a way which may be criticised as favouring them over against another group: the dominating one.

I'd like to think that we killed it all off – the discrimination women suffer - in the 1970s and 80s - but we did not, did we? You know we did not.

The Hebrew religious life and society that produced our Bibles was male dominated. Let's say that, and accept that. Let's recognise the prejudice. And there is stuff in our Bible that subordinates the women to the men. And, if you then say that the Bible is God's last word, you are going to take from it a certain attitude towards women, whether you are male or female.

For that reason I say to you that our job is to interpret God's Word for our own times. Amongst the tasks that mission sets us is this: we must challenge that sexist thinking. Let's see the human prejudice. Let's go the extra mile with the women. Lets look - not at Saint Paul – but at Jesus, and His relationship with his mother, with Martha, with Mary, with the Magdalene.

Somewhat late I mention our Blessed Lord. But he is always the point really. Were Deborah and Huldah Prophets? What did they prophecy? This - the wonder that is the grace of God, the procession of Divine love towards us, into

our world. Huldah shows too the aching heart of God for a people that will serve Him. She is telling us too of the righteousness of God. They both dress it up within the thinking and language of their own world, but it is Jesus who in the final analysis fulfils and completes all these Old Testament prophetic words.

And Hannah? We have seen together the parallels between her song, and the song of the mother of Christ. Hannah gives her child : Mary offers her childbearing to God. She offers her child to the world. Neither of them could see the future for the child. Nor can we for ours. Who knows what promise is wrapped up within our own children? We offer them to God. We commit them to God's plans for them. In that sense Hannah has a voice so prophetic, and so relevant to so many women, it is positively spine tingling. .... If we can stop to see that it is so.

The Bible is not misogynistic. There are bad women in it, but there are so many good women. Just as in our Bibles there are bad men and good men. Good as in doing things apparently approved by God. And – and this is my point today - the role of women set out in the Bible is wholly supportive of the notion of the woman as shaker, mover, and leader. It is also wholly understanding that the woman complements the man, and is different. And the Bible understands that the gifts that are uniquely hers bring special roles, and special needs. Above all, special honour.

Wade Street Church  
2 April 2017