

I have been sitting with these readings for a few weeks now trying to find some theme or thread.

This week I got a phone call from one of my daughters that her dad, my first husband had died. He and I were not close, we had gone our separate ways 24 years ago, and only seen each other at occasional combined family events – birthdays, weddings, and such.

His wife and I have only spoken in general to each other at these times, never a personal conversation. On Friday I decided to go and see her and take her some soup. I had no idea how she would receive me, whether she would feel I was intruding upon her grief, whether she would think the soup a weird thing to bring.

But she welcomed me with a hug and invited me in for a cuppa. She was waiting to speak to a funeral director about starting to make arrangements. I had thought about offering to be celebrant at the funeral if that helped. As we were getting on well I plucked up the courage to make the offer. She was warm to the idea but I didn't want her to commit herself and told her to think about.

The next morning she rang me and said that she'd prefer to have someone who doesn't know the background to be the celebrant. She was apologetic. I was relieved, but it was an awkward moment. And I don't know how that awkwardness will play out in the future.

Awkward conversations – awkward relationships – awkward dynamics.
I think that is what we are looking at here in the readings for tonight.

Firstly there is Hannah. The first and much loved wife of Elkanah, but she is barren. Second wife Penninah has children, and she likes to let Hannah know she is the better woman – she provokes her and irritates her and does not make for a happy household. That's awkward.

When they go to the tabernacle to worship and sacrifice Hannah takes herself off to present herself before the Lord. As a woman she is not allowed inside the tabernacle, so she stands outside. Eli the priest is sitting at the doorway and he sees her. She is distressed, weeping bitterly, making her prayer. Normally people would pray and thw words would be heard, but she is praying silently, only her lips moving. Eli thinks she is drunk, and challenges her. That's awkward.

But Hannah stands her ground. She doesn't tell Eli what she was praying for, just that she was praying. I can imagine him being embarrassed and he gives her his blessing.

Fast forward 2, 3 or 4 years. I wonder what Eli thought when Hannah and Elkanah show up and present Samuel to him. It seems strange to us to leave a child like this – our awkwardness, not theirs.

The song that is attributed to Hannah is recognised by scholars as a later insertion. It is a song of national thanksgiving – victory over enemies, the reversal of fortunes for the downtrodden and oppressed, children for the one who was barren, God's care for the poor and oppressed.

From her awkward position in the family dynamics, before the Tabernacle with Eli, Hannah brought her concerns to God, and she acted faithfully in keeping the promises she had made. From her faithfulness and gifting of Samuel we have the beginnings of the story of the monarchy in Israel. Samuel was the last in the line of judges and prophets who guided the people. He is the one who anoints Saul as the first king. Saul proves himself unfit for the job and so Samuel announces his rejection by God and then anoints David in his place. (That's awkward too!) But thus begins Israel's short-lived glory days.

Looking to the story in Mark. Jesus leaving the Temple and his disciples are praising the size of the stones. Jesus however is not impressed and predicts that not one stone will be left upon another. I just imagine the disciples feeling confused, unsettled, and awkward! What on earth is he talking about? It doesn't make sense.

But later sitting opposite the Temple, on the Mount of Olives, Peter, James, John, and Andrew come to him and want the details about when this will happen. What will be the signs? The answer Jesus gives is not clear on details, but his message is basically, 'Don't be distracted from the work of following God's movement by distressing events you experience or hear about.'

We know that there have been countless numbers of people over the millennia who have actually gone the other way. They hear of events happening, the wars, famines, earthquakes and predict the end days are here. That is awkward – especially when life goes on, and the wars, famines and earthquakes continue around the world. After the past couple of years we might want to add a few more distressing events to the list of the birth pangs as Jesus calls them: pandemic, storms, floods, hurricanes, climate change, rising sea waters.... There is a lot to distract us from the work of God in our world, and it is easy to get caught up in the drama of the present moment.

Turning to Hebrews – this is written after the destruction of the Temple as Jesus predicted. But it is full of the images of the Temple, the rituals of priests and sacrifices. The writer speaks of how Christ has made a single sacrifice that has sanctified us, made us holy, set us apart for God's purposes. Samuel was set apart by his mother to be a part of God's purposes. And God through Christ has set us apart – called us to be with God and for God, bringing about the kingdom of heaven on earth. We are not separated by the curtain from God who was thought to dwell in the inner sanctuary in the Temple. Jesus opened the way through the curtain and we are now all equally able to approach God. We are not restricted like Hannah from bringing ourselves fully to God. The stones of the Temple walls do not make the dwelling place of God. God has written a new covenant and placed within us, on our hearts and minds, the laws of this covenant.

You might be wondering where the awkward part is in Hebrews if I am maintaining a theme.

Well, how about this? Remember that Hannah was provoked by Peninnah, provoked to distress and anguish? I see in Hebrews that we are offered an indication of the privileges and duties we have as Christians. In my NRSV Bible we are told firstly, 'Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.' There is nothing to separate us from God's love, so come and be assured that all are welcome.

Secondly the writer says, 'Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.' Like Hannah's song of victory, we can be assured that God is present with us, and that God's will is for those who are suffering, oppressed, downtrodden, that they will be freed from oppression and able to live in peace and with joy.

Lastly the writer says, 'And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.' (As an aside here – the writer had no ideas about the possibilities of how people could continue to meet together thanks to technology, so well done in extending the possibilities of this.)

'The Day approaching' could be another reference to the end times but that isn't what catches my attention here. It is the word 'provoke'. 'Provoke one another to love and good deeds.' Provoke in my dictionary doesn't have positive overtones. It says:

- To stimulate or give rise to (a reaction or emotion, typically a strong or unwelcome one) in someone.
- To stimulate or incite (someone) to do or feel something, especially by arousing anger in them.
- To deliberately make (someone) annoyed or angry.

When I think of being provoked the image is of someone with a stick who keeps poking me to annoy me.

'Provoke one another to love and good deeds.' What are we being told to do here? Is it a matter of being so annoying to each other about good deeds that we feel we have to get up and do something good too? I have lived in church cultures that felt like that at times, a competition of people trying to outdo each other in saintliness and holiness. Now that is awkward!

I am rescued by the footnote in my NRSV Bible that puts it like this: 'Let us consider how we can help others in love.' I am relieved. No awkward poking of others to get them to do good deeds, but instead an invitation to look at myself and my action and see what I can do that is loving and supporting of others. Together we are the body, and together we build the kingdom, one stone at a time.

So I want to invite you to consider the awkwardness of being God's people. Our actions of love and care for others stands against the me-first culture of our world at this time. There is much to do, many places and people and programs that call for us to make a response that is just, loving, and builds a better world.

Let us be awkward followers of Jesus. Like Hannah let us approach God with all the concerns of hearts and minds, and trust God when it looks impossible. Like Jesus let us be bold with our belief that God will bring down the structures that oppress and limit us, facing into the future with our whole hearts. And like the writer to the Hebrews, let us stimulate and affirm the action of God's love in our own lives and each other.

Just as a footnote: There maybe times when it appropriate to be annoying – to 'provoke one another to love and good deeds.' Ring, write, email our political leaders and try to get them behaving like responsible citizens of our world!

Here endeth the lesson.

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