

Carol Elsasser – 14 March 2021

I've been asked to introduce you to Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Elizabeth was the wife of Zechariah, who was a priest and a member of the Levite tribe and Elizabeth herself was descended from Aaron, the first high priest of the Israelites. So both John's chosen parents were righteous – familiar with the scriptures and living Godly lives. Both ideally suited to bring up John to fulfil his prophesised ministry and to teach him the scriptures that related to him and his purpose.

But it wasn't a straightforward start.

Elizabeth wasn't just old – she is described as “very old” and “well on in years”.

As Gilly mentioned at that time being childless would have been a source of great shame, disgrace and reproach in her society. Her "failure" to provide her husband with a son to carry on the family name could even have been considered grounds for him divorcing her. But Elizabeth remained faithful to God. She knew that God remembers those who are loyal to him.

Elizabeth's faithfulness came to the fore when her husband was struck dumb for disbelieving the Angel Gabriel's news that Elizabeth would bear a son who they should call John - meaning God is Gracious. So when the time came to name the baby – on the eighth day at his circumcision - it would have been assumed that the baby would be named after his father in the normal way. As Zechariah still couldn't speak Elizabeth would have had to have courage, speak up, stand firm and obey God – in a ceremony when women's voices would not normally have been heard.

She knew what God had entrusted them to do.

What can we take from Elizabeth's story - We too should believe God is going to do what he says he will do - even when it seems impossible. We should trust God with the circumstances and timings of our life. He keeps his promises.

As parents we should have the same desire as Elizabeth to teach and inspire our children and the children around us within our church family - in the ways of God and pray for God's hand upon their lives and futures.

On researching Elizabeth, I was also struck by how merciful our God is – both Elizabeth and Zechariah were elderly when John was born so I think it is very likely that they didn't live long enough to see their son beheaded by Herod. God spared them that. God is a merciful God.

Thank you Lord that you are a God true to your promises and both faithful and merciful.

Amen.

I have been looking at Hannah. Samuels' mother. The story of Samuel can be found in the books of Samuel in the Old Testament. And they are full of well known, exciting, stories.

But it all begins with Hannah, who is one of the seven women written about in scripture who struggle to have a child. And as many of us know, in those times, having children was the main role for women. It gave them status and respect. Without them she was seen as a failure. Hannah's husband loved her anyway, and very much, but her lack of fertility ensured that Elkanah's other wife enjoyed belittling her and making her life a misery. Hannah must have felt desolate and forgotten by God.

This was a God fearing family and they all followed the law by visiting the tabernacle three times a year and offering the required sacrifices. On one of these visits it all got too much for Hannah and she sort solace in the temple. Weeping and distressed to such a point that the priest thought she was drunk, she prays. 'O Lord of Hosts; O lord most powerful; O Lord Almighty'. She has a faith. She knows who God is. In her anguished prayer she promises to give her child back to the Lord. And when Eli the priest questions her she explains. He blesses this prayer. Hannah leaves having received the peace of God. Knowing that He heard her prayer.

Interestingly, she has to be patient. We have no idea how long she waits. But she does.

Verse 20 of 1 Sam1 says, '....so in the course of time.' She gives birth to Samuel. The name means, heard of God.

She lovingly cares for him. Then, when he is weaned; probably about 3 yrs of age. She takes him to the temple and leaves him with Eli the priest.

**'As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given to the LORD.'** v25-28 1Sam1

God answered her prayer, and she fulfils her promise. Even though she gave up what she wanted most. We can see that everything really does come from God. He hears our heartfelt prayers. And he answers in his own good time. Hannah went on to have 5 more children. And Samuel became a man of prayer, a great prophet and Israel's last judge.

Our children are all given to us by Gods grace. They are on loan. And we have to let them go, to be the people He created them to be.

There is an African proverb that says, 'It takes a village to raise a child,'

Or a Church! That's all of us. Praying for our children, our own church children, the school children. All of them. Wherever they are, whatever they are doing. Not despairing, but keeping hopeful and praying.

Thank you. All of you, for your prayers and support for my children. For all the children. Being a mother is a joy and privilege. But we all help in the mothering. Of the children and of each other.

## Samson. Judges 13-16

Two questions to ponder. When you were a teenager, what did you have as a priority in your life plan? Possible careers, uni, what you definitely didn't want to do? Any thoughts of love, home, family? Even secretly, to yourself, or with God?

And here's my other question. How are you feeling today? Brave as a lion or sweet as honey?

My story is about a woman longing for a baby and a boy who grows up to be as brave as a lion and sweet as honey (mostly where women were concerned.)

Mrs Manoah. A respectable Israelite woman. Married. Hard worker. Nice husband. But she has such a longing. Such a deep longing. She prays and prays for a baby.

And then one day, as she pauses for a rest in the fields, someone comes to speak to her. Does she know straight away who he is? Does her heart thump? Does she feel a bit faint? And what news he has for her! She is going to have a child! A boy, and he is to be brought up a Nazarite, specially dedicated to God, and with strict rules on how to live. In fact, she should start on the Nazarite way of life straight away. Good diet, no rubbish. No alcohol.

Joy can rise up in you like a volcano, like a fountain spouting, pumping through your veins. She just runs to tell Mr Manoah, and Mr Manoah, quite rightly, asks more questions. Well, pray! She says. Pray! And the angel returns and scares the life out of him! Don't worry, she says, calm down. God is blessing us. God is blessing us.

They bring that baby up carefully, firmly, so that he knows that he is God's. He grows up big and strong. Wow! How strong! When the Spirit fills him, he can tear a lion apart, kill a crowd of Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. He is to begin the end of 40 years' Philistine occupation.

This isn't the end of the story. He has a weakness for the girls. You'll have to read the rest of his story in Judges if you want to know the details!

Mrs Manoah does her best, her very best. She loves this boy, brings him up as a good Israelite. She must be so proud of him, particularly when he becomes a judge and when he launches himself into the battle to free the Israelites from Philistine rule.

Mrs Manoah is great at praying. She talks to God. She knows that she can ask him for anything. She probably wakes up in the night and prays for that boy, for wisdom and devotion to his God-given task. And for safety in dangerous times. Thank you, God for such grace. And please, God, bless all mothers!

**Fleur Pelly, 14 March 2021**