

# Parenting and parentage

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 December 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Des Perry

Christmas 1C

**I Samuel 2: 18-20, 26; Luke 2: 41-52; Contemporary Reading**  
*How Can A Baby Change The World* by Brian Wren

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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For those of you who are anxious that we skipped the contemporary reading, I think it fits better at the end of the reflection so you need to flip back to your response at the end of this reflection. But before we do that, I did have a children's story ready. There's no children so I'm just going to share a couple of things about what I wanted to say to the children.

In my bag here I have a couple of my friends. And what do I want to say about these four comic book characters? I want to say that the mythologies that have built up about these characters have interesting parallels with ancient stories of heroes and great leaders. And the most interesting thing is their parentage and their experience of being parented.

I won't go through all four of them, but let's take, for example, Batman. Batman's parents were rich wealthy industrialists and they died in a motor vehicle accident. Batman was brought up by the Butler, Alfred. I don't know whether you know that story but it's a really important story about why Batman became the person that he was.

Interestingly, Superman lived on the planet of Krypton and the planet of Krypton got destroyed and Superman's parents put him in a shuttle rocket and sent him off into space before the planet exploded and he landed on Earth and was adopted by a couple and looked after and had a good family experience by his adopted parents.

Spiderman a bit the same you know. His parents died and he was brought up by Auntie Mae. And Wonder Woman, probably most interesting of all, she was made of clay by a woman who she called mother, but her family was the Amazonians. A land of women only, so she was brought up in a women only parenting arrangement.

I hope you find that interesting. Because I think it does have a direct relationship with the story that we heard from Angela today about a great hero of Judaism, a fellow called Samuel. Samuel literally means God Here. So the name of this hero, this hero of Judaism, relates to something that happened in the story itself - which most of us know from our Sunday School days - how God called out to Samuel - and Samuel didn't know where the voice was. Then, after 3 times, the priest Eli, who looked after him, told him to say: *Yes Lord I'm here* - and then there was this conversation and Samuel became a great prophet and judge of Israel.

But look, there's a few things that are a bit dicey about this - and I want to experience or explore the diciness. Let me say one thing. First of all, the reading that Angela read said that Hannah, Samuels's mother, went up to Jerusalem. And that's rubbish. Because Jerusalem was a place of pilgrimage for the Israelis, for the people of Israel didn't exist until 900 B.C. - and this story should've taken place at around about 1100 B.C.

The place of pilgrimage where the tent or the tabernacle was kept, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed, was at Shiloh, which was a very holy and important sacred site for the people of Israel. And all the priests were there and people would travel to Shiloh every year as described and so it wasn't 2 to300 years later that people started to pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Actually, as it turns out it's just a problem with translation - because when you look at the older versions of the Bible - the King James Version etc - the word Jerusalem is not there. It just says when she went out to sacrifice, or pay homage, or meditate or whatever. It doesn't really matter. Except that you know the old saying: *That it ain't necessarily so*. The things that you read in the Bible are not necessarily so - and it's good that we are able to question some of these ideas and thoughts as we analyse and think about the stories.

So as I was preparing for this reflection today, I thought a little bit and read a little bit about the Holy Land. Holy to three faiths, as we sang in the hymn: to Islam to Judaism and to Christianity.

And I also read a little bit about the history of the book of Samuel, Which is also something that we might want to question. They're important because they help us to understand the context of the story itself. So let me tell you four things that I found out that might be of interest to you.

First of all I mentioned Shiloh was a holy place of pilgrimage for the Hebrews for 350 years between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries before the Common Era. The Tabernacle was there, as I mentioned. It was a tent the priests ministered there and this was established before the temple in Jerusalem, which was a city that existed for 3000 years before the Common Era. But it was a Canaanite city. It really didn't belong to the people of Israel. It was already there when they came, you know, across the Jordan River into Canaan - and it was a holy place.

But it was holy in the sense that the Canaanites were polytheistic so they believed in lots of gods. But they still had this centre where they would come and pay their respects. So I'm not sure what this might mean for the modern day claim by our Prime Minister that West Jerusalem should be the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem the capital of Palestine. But it's food for thought. I just thought I'd throw that one in.

The reading that we had from the Hebrew scripture was written down between 550and 650 before the Common Era. But the story was actually about events that happened 500 years earlier.

So Samuel, just like Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman and Spider-Man is a superhero of Judaism. He was the last of the judges who held the twelve tribes of Israel together. Samuel was the priest who ultimately anointed the first king of Israel - and Samuel was the person who also had a rather odd experience of being parented.

Samuel's heritage included forebears from both the Levite and the Ephraimite Tribes, two of the twelve tribes but two of the ten lost tribes of Israel that were lost during the Babylonian captivity and there were never really referred to again.

So only two tribes survived and it's important, I guess, to the story, that whoever wrote the book of Samuel wanted the readers to know that Samuel was credentialed. That is, he came from two of the Lost Tribes - the priestly tribe, the Levites and the Ephraimites, the descendants of Ephraim, who was the son of Joseph. So that's the history lesson. But it's important for us to get that, because it's part of the context of the story that we read about Samuel and his experience and Hannah's experience.

I find it very satisfying that in a progressive faith tradition, we can question and have critical and even possibly cynical approaches to sacred texts. We do not have to be apologists for inconsistencies that we see in the texts, but we can be open to cultural and historical idiosyncrasies that make the texts more human and aligned to our own life experiences.

Now the story itself - I want to tie it in with the Gospel reading is - it is important to note that the story of Jesus, the boy quizzing the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem, was written between 70 and a 100 years after the event. So again there are elements of the hero's story contained in the narrative and the writer of the Gospel would also have been well aware of the Hebrew story of Samuel and his life.

In both stories there are two parents and a child. Both involve an annual pilgrimage to a sacred site. Both involve a child who is destined for greatness in a faith tradition; and both involve a parent who is anxious and troubled - but proud and hopeful.

I wonder what modern day child psychologists would make of the mother Hannah bargaining with God to have a son (and note the focus on the gender of the child showing its tribal and male dominated cultural context). Of course she is in a difficult situation because she does not seem to be able to have children - while her husband's other wife apparently has no problem conceiving and Hannah is treated with scorn.

The bargain involved Hannah giving up her son to Eli, a priest in Shiloh. This must have been a very confronting and harrowing experience for a parent, especially for one that wanted a child so badly. After Samuel was weaned her contact with her son was limited to once a year to give him a coat.

Under normal circumstances Samuel would not have been destined for the priesthood, especially as Eli had two sons who were lined up for the job. As it turned out these 2 fellows were charlatans and abused their power and responsibilities, unlike Samuel who was a goody two shoes - and a true hero just like these people.

In some ways there is a contrast with the child Jesus, who appears to have worried his parents unnecessarily. Surely he would have known how worried they would have been when he went missing! The Gospel assures us that from then on Jesus turns a new leaf and is obedient to his parents from then.

For me, both the stories speak of the struggles that are involved in being a parent and also how difficult it is to be a child. Many members of this congregation have had tremendous and sometimes heartbreaking struggles in being parents. Many others of us have had less than optimal childhoods because of the way we were parented.

In the quietness of this space, I'm going to ask you to reflect just for a few minutes on the two Bible stories and then to briefly share your reflection with one or two people next to you.

When you think of your own parenting or of being parented, I wonder which of the following characters you most identify with? I've got four, but it's not these four.

First of all, do you identify with Samuel - God hears - who is seemingly abandoned by Hannah and raised by someone else that is destined for great deeds?

Or do you do you identify with Hannah who keeps a bargain with God - which means limited child contact but contributes to a great outcome?

Or do you identify with Mary whose child is missing which makes her anxious and upset. But in finding out how the child amazed the religious leaders, was filled with pride?

Or do you identify with Jesus who acknowledges causing worry and inconvenience to the family, but is totally at peace in exploring life's questions with the religious leaders?

So I'm asking you which of those four? I know it's a forced choice because none of them might fully be something that you identify with. But which of those most closely fits for you? Is it Samuel, Hannah, Mary or Jesus? Just a couple of minutes to share with the person next to you.

OK I'm not going to ask you to report back at this point, but there's something that you might want to continue discussing as we have coffee and tea later. Let's go now back to the contemporary reading.

Listen for words of faith in a reflection by Brian Wren: *How can a baby change the world?* ©