

4. Hannah's Story

Introduction - Before listening to this story please press 'pause' and read Matthew 27.15-23 then the story will last a little over 10 minutes and will be followed by a short reflection and a prayer.

My story begins with deep and profound joy. We had only been married a short time and we were beginning to get to know, and actually love, each other. It galled us to admit it, but our parents had made a good match putting us together, and we were happy. Then, as if to complete our happiness, I fell pregnant. We were overjoyed.

I had heard all sorts of horror stories, from the women I met each day at the well, about the problems and discomfort of pregnancy and the pain and danger of child birth, but none of this applied to me. I blossomed in pregnancy and, though it was painful, I had an uncomplicated and quick birth. Before we knew it we had a beautiful, healthy son to love and care for. The name of our new little ball of life was Jesus Barabbas. He had spirit – when he was hungry he certainly let us know and he seemed not to need very much sleep. He was alert and inquisitive. He kept us busy, entertained and permanently exhausted.

We thought that having one child was hard work but within the next five years we had three more children and realised what hard work really was. I loved all my children but always kept a special place in my heart for my first born son who continued to grow and continued to be inquisitive, he asked questions about everything and challenged every rule we tried to set. We didn't mind too much because he was a good boy, he questioned the rules but he liked them and lived by them until just after his bar-mitzvah, which is when the problems began.

It started gradually. Our conversations became shorter. He stopped asking so many questions because he seemed to think he knew all the answers, and he started to push the boundaries of the rules he had always stuck by. We excused this by telling ourselves he was simply in that tricky period between being a child and being an adult. We thought his rudeness and disobedience would pass. It didn't!

Between the age of 14 and 17 he slowly distanced himself from us and from our family. Having questioned and rejected our authority as his parents, he went on to question and reject the authority of his teachers at



school and then to question and reject the authority of the Romans who ran our small country. He began to consort with others who hated the Romans. To be fair, most of us hated the Romans but most of us had families to feed and jobs to do – most of us were happy to keep our heads down, pay our taxes, complain about the Romans (when there weren't any around!) and enjoy the order their rule had brought. But, as ever, there were others, mostly young men, unmarried with no jobs and no responsibilities, who filled their time with being angry about the Romans and fermenting trouble. My beautiful, inquisitive first born son, Jesus Barabbas, began mixing with this group. We challenged him, we encouraged him to find work, we talked about possible wives, but he rejected everything we offered – even our unconditional love. As he became an adult he left home and we began to see little of him. He broke our hearts, but we still had children to care for and our own ailing parents depended on us, so we plodded on with our mundane lives.

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He had left home but we all lived in a fairly small community so I was able to keep track of what he was doing. My son, Barabbas, would have you believe that he was an idealist, a good Jew working for the independence of his people. In fact he was a very poor Jew, he rarely attended Synagogue and he sat lightly to many of our laws, he didn't honour his father and mother for a start! In addition, revolutionaries do not get paid, so he and his friends had to get money to live from somewhere and I fear that they got it by stealing. They would justify their actions by saying that they only stole from the Romans, which I don't think was true, and they would claim that they gave money to poor Jewish people. But they were breaking both Jewish and Roman laws, and they always seemed to be well fed themselves, and sometimes drunk, while the poor continued to starve and beg on the streets.

Ordinary Jewish people had a strange relationship with these rebels. None of us liked the Romans and we wanted our independence, but, the Romans were a massive force and we were a tiny nation and, as I said before, most of us had jobs to do and mouths to feed. We hated paying taxes to the Romans but, if we worked hard, we could pay them and still live fairly well, which is why most of us just got on with living our lives, we didn't have the time or the energy to have a revolution, particularly one we couldn't win! So we ordinary Jews supported the rebels when we had fallen foul of some ridiculous Roman law or we'd had a drink, but the rest of the time we just got on with life. My problem was that I could never forget my son Barabbas – he had broken my heart but I still loved him.



I thought it couldn't get any worse but then I heard that he had been arrested. It would appear that he had been part of a group of rebels who had attacked a much smaller group of Roman soldiers, killing two and leaving the others badly injured. In the ensuing inquiry the headquarters of the rebels had been searched, fine clothes, ornaments and money stolen from Roman houses were discovered and a number of rebels, including Barabbas, were arrested. His fate was sealed, he would be executed.

The centre of Jerusalem was the last place I wanted to go, but if I was going to see him again, I knew I had to go there. As I walked I remembered the day I discovered I was pregnant with him and the joy I felt. I remembered his birth and the overwhelming love I felt when I held him in my arms for the first time. I remembered that spirited, inquisitive, obedient little boy what should I have done differently? What had I done wrong? He should be married, he should be a father, he should be working hard to support his family, and I should be a grandmother. Instead I am walking to Jerusalem on a hot Friday to see him for the last time before he is executed as a revolutionary. Clearly I had been a terrible mother.

Jerusalem was seething with people getting ready to celebrate the Passover. The Roman governor would be the one who would pass judgement on the rebels so I went to find his house. As I arrived I heard my son's name being chanted. *'Release Barabbas, release Barabbas'* the crowd yelled. I was confused and asked people around me what was happening. It transpired that the Roman governor, Pilate, was in a quandary. There was another rebel, a religious rebel, called Jesus of Nazareth, who had been passed to the Romans for execution, but, by Roman law Jesus had done nothing wrong. He had a reputation as a healer, his teaching was strange and confusing but nothing he had done or said broke the Roman law. Pilate wanted to release him, and, remembering an old convention that at the time of the Jewish Passover he could release a prisoner without charge, he offered to release a Jewish prisoner. This practise was designed to make the Roman authorities look good and merciful, a way to keep the Jewish people broadly on their side. It would appear that the crowd, emboldened by their dislike of the Romans, and probably by some pre-Passover Festival drinking, had tuned in to their nationalist pride and decided that my son, Barabbas, was not a waster, a misguided and hypocritical idealist, a sad and pathetic criminal, but some kind of folk hero, a revolutionary dedicated to the liberation of God's chosen people, so they called for his release, not the release of the religious rebel, Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate's plan was backfiring and I didn't know what to think. I could just see the two prisoners in the distance, my son smirking as his friends whipped up the nationalist fervour of the crowd, and Jesus, who just looked ordinary still and quiet.



I had never seen Jesus of Nazareth before but I had heard about him. I didn't know if he was a really good man but it seemed clear to me that he wasn't a bad man. It would seem that he had a reputation as a healer, a holy man and an interesting yet confusing teacher. The problem was that he didn't appear to be a particularly fastidious Jew and the Pharisees and the Scribes, most of whom were (or seemed to be) fastidious about their faith beyond belief, hated him for being a disturbing influence on the people they liked to control, so they wanted him dead.

In the end, Pilate took the easy option, he caved in to the religious bigots and the baying mob, he released Barabbas and condemned the religious rebel, Jesus of Nazareth, to death.

My broken heart fragmented. On my way to Jerusalem I had been assailed by shame for the actions of my son, and guilt for my failings which had contributed to his terrible actions. Now I felt relief, that my beautiful, spirited and inquisitive little boy was not going to be executed. However, I also felt anger, because I knew he was guilty and that he deserved punishment. I felt ashamed that my criminal son was walking free while Jesus, a seemingly good man, was condemned to death by a weak leader. I also felt deep sadness for the mother of Jesus, whoever and wherever she was. He was her beautiful, spirited and inquisitive son, who she had borne and held and surrounded by love, and now he was going to be executed.

I should have gone to my son, Barabbas, but now was not the time. The last I saw he was being carried on the shoulders of his friends, like a hero, to the nearest inn to celebrate his release, so I went to Golgotha where the execution would take place. I don't know why I went but it was something to do with respect for Jesus and a feeling of sympathy for his mother.

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I couldn't watch as they hammered in the nails. Once he was upright and the crowds were dispersing I could see a woman, who must have been his mother, close to the cross. I wondered if it had been my son on the cross if I would have had the courage and the love to stand so close as he died. Did my unconditional love stretch that far? I wasn't sure.

And so I watched an innocent man die instead of my guilty son. He was taking the punishment that should have been my son's. It was as if he was paying the price for my son's life. This was all wrong. I found some shade, sat on the ground and the tears came, a hopeless, retching mess of shame, thanks, guilt, relief,

sorrow and despair shook me to the core – how could God allow this massive injustice? The only way any of this could make any sense at all was if my son seized the life this man had given him and used it for good.

Between my sobs I heard a cry of despair in the distance and stood to see his body give way to death. As the woman I assumed was his mother fell to the ground in grief I went to find my beautiful boy. She had stood with her son, an innocent man, as he died unjustly. I had to find my guilty son and stand by him to encourage him to live a good life from now on. His life was a gift from Jesus of Nazareth he didn't deserve.

Short pause

Reflection As Barabbas' mother surveyed the wondrous cross she would have seen an innocent man dying for her beloved, but guilty, son. As we reflect on this story we stand alongside Barabbas' mother surveying the cross with a mixture of shame and thanksgiving. May we seize the new life the cross gives us and fill our lives with the kindness, compassion, goodness and love which overflowed from the life of Jesus.

Prayer Lord Christ, you have reminded us that a grain of wheat remains a single grain unless it falls into the ground and dies, but that if it dies it bears a rich harvest. As we survey the wondrous cross, grant that we, like the grain of wheat, may die to self, so that we may live for others and follow you in the path of sacrifice and service, to the glory of God the Father. Amen