

God the Great Lover

Sunday 19 July 2009 – Rev Lance Thomas

1 John 4:7-16 and Hosea 1:2-9

Imagine you are a young man aged about 18 or 19 years old. The world is at your feet and God is at your side. The voice you know and love speaks one day as clearly as it ever has done. Son, I want you to marry now.

You reply eagerly, 'Yes Lord. Where is she? Who is she?'

You are an upright, God fearing, God loving young man and not that bad looking. Surely God has in mind for you something of a cross between the Virgin Mary and Angelina Jolie. 'No Son, I want you to marry a prostitute – and she is not going to change just because she marries you.'

That's pretty much what happened to the Prophet Hosea. In Hosea's prophecy and in Hosea's pain we discover the secret heart of God, his innermost feelings, his profound sorrow, his amazing Grace.

Nowhere else in the Old Testament do we see God so tender and so vulnerable.

The story of the centuries after Moses is a story of contrast, good days under Joshua, as God's people made their home in the promised land. Chaotic days under the Judges, good days under King David. And days, years, centuries of decline after him.

After Solomon a story of civil war, a nation dividing into two kingdoms, two centres of religion, unworthy kings – and again and again during this time the people follow their leaders into new forms of religion, mixing the worship of God with the Baals and the fertility cults of the surrounding people and the gods of other nations. The Prophets had a word for this. They called it adultery, spiritual adultery on a national scale.

Other nations behaved like Israel, or in other words Israel was no different to other nations. But they *were* different, they were God's people, they had a special relationship with God. In Jeremiah 3:14 God says, 'Return faithless people, declares the Lord, for I am your husband.' God had been a husband to Israel over all these centuries, but he had known more pain than pleasure in the relationship. His holy love had been violated and betrayed over and over again.

It is the people we love who can hurt us the most. You can almost put the potential pain of a relationship on a scale. If we get a sharp word, or a rude gesture from a stranger it hardly registers. Quite different to the upsetting clash we might have with a friend, or the stinging pain of a jilting, the ache of a parent and child falling out, but the most wounding of all is the betrayal of a marriage.

In Hosea we discover God's capacity for pain and sorrow. Love makes us vulnerable. In this book God expresses his love for his people as the love of a husband for his wife.

God calls Hosea to bring a prophecy to the people of Israel. Hosea prophesied for forty years, trying to express the heart of God, the love of God, and warn against the consequences of continuing to ignore God.

Some people may think it would be cool to be a prophet, the mouth piece of God. If you think that you might want to read a bit of Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Hosea.

Hosea had to live the history of Israel and the suffering of God. He had to endure while his own marriage became a parable of God's marriage to Israel. He had to allow his heart to burn with the pain of God's heart.

The wife God had for Hosea was no cross between the Virgin Mary and Angelina. Her name was Gomer and she was an adulteress. The implication is she continued in her adulterous ways from the start of the marriage. Gomer gives birth to three children and Hosea takes them as his. God tells Hosea what to name the children. The first he calls Jezreel, to remind people of the massacre at Jezreel that led to the dynasty of kingship which the current leaders of Israel were part of. The second child of the marriage, a girl, was called Lo-Ruhamah, which means not loved, a warning that God would no longer show love to the house of Israel and the third, another son, was called Lo-Ammi which means not my people, for God says, 'You are not my people and I am not your God'.

Tough being a prophet. Tough being a prophet's child.

At this point in the prophecies we see God acting as we would expect a humiliated husband to act. He is angry, he outlines the punishment that he will inflict on Israel.

Hosea 2:9-13

"Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens,
and my new wine when it is ready.

I will take back my wool and my linen,
intended to cover her nakedness.

¹⁰ So now I will expose her lewdness
before the eyes of her lovers;
no one will take her out of my hands.

¹¹ I will stop all her celebrations:
her yearly festivals, her New Moons,
her Sabbath days—all her appointed feasts.

¹² I will ruin her vines and her fig trees,
which she said were her pay from her lovers;
I will make them a thicket,
and wild animals will devour them.

¹³ I will punish her for the days
she burned incense to the Baals;
she decked herself with rings and jewellery,
and went after her lovers,
but me she forgot,"
declares the LORD.

The anger of a humiliated husband. Its all over, it's finished, it's done with.

But then the prophecy changes, the anger is burnt out and the love still remains. And God says, 'I will win back Israel's love...'

Hosea 2:14-23

14 "Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.

15 There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.

16 "In that day," declares the LORD,
"you will call me 'my husband';
you will no longer call me 'my master.'

17 I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips;
no longer will their names be invoked.

18 In that day I will make a covenant for them
with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air
and the creatures that move along the ground.
Bow and sword and battle
I will abolish from the land,
so that all may lie down in safety.

19 I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.

20 I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the LORD.

21 "In that day I will respond,"
 declares the LORD—
 "I will respond to the skies,
 and they will respond to the earth;
 22 and the earth will respond to the grain,
 the new wine and oil,
 and they will respond to Jezreel.
 23 I will plant her for myself in the land;
 I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'
 I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';
 and they will say, 'You are my God.' "

Not only does the prophet bring the words of God, again he is called to live them out in his life. By this stage Gomer has left her home, her children, her husband and gone to one of her lovers. Eventually she ends up in some sort of prostitution, a temple prostitute or a slave or a purchased mistress. In his love, Hosea seeks her out and purchases her from the one to whom she belongs. She is his wife. She rejects him. Leaves him, goes off with other lovers, eventually finds herself in some sort of slavery – and Hosea comes and buys her back. The purchase cost, the scholars tell us, is unusual and may indicate the prophet having to scrape together all he can for her redemption.

So God's words of love to Israel, despite her treatment of him, are echoed in Hosea's actions and in his redeeming love for Gomer.

Some people suggest that the God of love is only found in the New Testament. But as we have looked at what we can know of God, over the last couple of months, we have seen God's love, in the Garden of Eden, in his covenant relationship with Israel, in the story of Noah. In his holiness, in his passion for the poor and today in the story of Hosea and Gomer, a parable of God and Israel. Throughout the Old Testament we see the love of God as so much part of his nature that we are prepared for the New Testament statement that 'God is love'. That statement was written by a Jew whose knowledge of God was rooted in the Old Testament. But a Jew who had seen the fullest expression of God's love in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament we see the depth of God's love. The people of Israel are God's chosen people. His relationship with them is unique. Israel is his child, his bride, the apple of his eye. And when they forgot that, as they often did, the prophets were there to remind them.

As we venture into the New Testament we see something more of God's love, if possible, an even greater depth and an amazing new breadth.

For God so loved the whole world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God's love is not just for Israel but the whole world, and the amazing thing about this is not just that the world is big, but the world is also bad.

On the Cross Jesus has his arms out-stretched. It's a symbol of God saying my heart is big enough, big enough for the sins of the whole world.

Gomer's treatment of Hosea was awful. Israel's treatment of God was awful. Hosea's love, God's love was greater. Hosea gave all he had to redeem Gomer. God gave all he had to redeem us.

We fail God, sometimes we may think, so badly he could never love us. Look at God's love for Israel, Hosea's love. Look at the Cross, the arms opened wide, the embrace that is for us. As bad as our failures are, the love of God is greater.

Three things to leave you with

1. God loves us – accept that love, live in it, live loved.
2. We can grieve God. Live like only one who is loved can. The Church, the Bride of Christ, think about the way we live.
3. Imitate our God, love unconditionally, open our arms out to the world.