Sermon for 17th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Hosea 1:2-10; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13.

i

Hosea is one of the most shocking stories of the Bible. Most of us know St. Paul’s decree that Christians should not consort with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15), but fewer of us recall that God himself commanded Hosea to marry one.

This highly shocking breach of social convention was a deliberate act on Hosea’s part to proclaim his message. Prophets often resorted to highly colourful and symbolic actions to illustrate their prophetic message. Isaiah was told to walk naked and barefoot through Jerusalem to signify its coming captivity, Jeremiah was told to bury a waistcoat and later dig it up as a symbol of Judah’s spiritual health and to wear a yoke made of iron to depict the unbreakable bars of captivity threatened by rebellion against Babylon. Ezekiel had to forego mourning the death of his wife to illustrate the greater grief that Jerusalem’s fall would engender.

In a similarly theatrical and shocking manner, Hosea married a prostitute to illustrate what God’s children had come to.

Gomer, Hosea’s wife, is as unfaithful as Israel has been unfaithful to God, who is often referred to as being Israel’s “husband”, as in Jeremiah’s later refrain:

“It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, although I was their husband, says the Lord” (Jer 31:32).

We are told that Hosea’s first child was his, but the text suggests that the next two children Gomer bore were not necessarily Hosea’s.

These children symbolise the ever more distant relationship between Israel and their God which culminates in the third child who is called, Lo-Ammi, which means, “not my people.”

This is the shocking truth; God’s children are no longer God’s children. They have gone after other gods and they have ceased to live as obedient, respectful and loving children.

Being a child of God is not just about birth, but also about behaviour.

ii

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are all about restoring men and women to their rightful relationship with God their Father. The relationship has been broken by human sin, but God has not abandoned his prodigal children forever. He welcomes them home.

In Hosea we see the dramatic turn-around from Lo-Ammi, “not my people” in verse 9, to being called “sons of the living God” in verse 10. The One who shall reunite Israel and restore this relationship with God their Father is a leader who shall arise “from the land” (Verse 11).

In Luke 11 we read in the Lord’s Prayer that Christians are instructed to call God “Father”: through Jesus, the faithful Son, the relationship has been restored.

The parables that immediately follow the Lord’s Prayer are intended to illustrate the nature of what it means when you call God “Father.”

In the first parable, a man comes to a friend’s house at midnight asking for three loaves to feed a guest who has just arrived. The friend is none-too-pleased at being disturbed in the night and the whole family being woken up. After all, just how desperate is this need? Sure, hospitality is a conventional duty, but why should he get out of bed to give bread for a friend’s friend who has turned up unannounced at midnight?

Yet even in these tenuous circumstances, the man gets up and gives his friend all the bread he needs.

If even a friend will help out in such unpropitious circumstances, how much more will God, our heavenly Father, respond to our prayers? Hence: “Ask and it will be given; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened.”

The second parable further illustrates the action of a loving father to his children. If even a sinful human father would never give a child a snake for a fish, or a scorpion for an egg, how much more will your heavenly Father know how to give good gifts to his children?

iii

Our third passage today features St Paul who is wrestling with the practicalities of this restored relationship with God in the life of the Church.

Paul prays constantly that the followers of Jesus may “live a life worthy of the Lord” (Col 1:10).

It seems the old problem that faced Hosea hasn’t gone away just because Christ has come to restore the relationship.

Christ has replaced the old sign of belonging to God’s family, circumcision, with the new sign, Christian baptism. It is only by sharing in the victory of Christ over sin that we can have a part in Christ’s inheritance.

The old Law, the “written code” has been nailed to the cross and destroyed because it had become an instrument for preventing gentiles from becoming children of God and a false security for those who considered themselves saved by birth right, or by fulfilling the regulations of the Law.

Yet despite all that Christ has done, it is still possible to **lose** one’s place within the family of God.

Before Christ made them alive, they had been “dead” in their sins (verse 13), but baptism into Christ is no more a magic key into the kingdom than circumcision was. The fruits of what Christ has restored on your behalf can be lost again.

That is why Paul prays that believers will not be taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (verse 8).

**Becoming** a child of God is a free gift – it is what Christ, and Christ alone, can offer to an estranged humanity which cannot restore the relationship through its own efforts, no matter which Law or rules are followed.

**Staying** a child of God is matter of choice, of obedience and of commitment.

For staying a child of God depends on you and on whether you are prepared to live a life that befits a child of the Almighty and glorifies your Father in Heaven.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**July 2015**