

Hosea 1 : 2 – 10

Luke 11 : 1 - 13

Sermon

The story of Hosea and his wife may not be one that we will often come across in Sunday School classes, possibly because it is built around what we might now call some “adult themes”, but perhaps it is all the more interesting for that. Certainly it is a dramatic tale, and when we see it in its wider context we discover that it is also an enormously powerful and relevant story. So here is what happens.

God tells Hosea, not to preach, but to get married. Speaking as a man who has done both I won't comment on which seem like the best option, but Hosea didn't have an option. When God tells you to get married you get married. But that wasn't all. He was to go and find a wife who was going to be unfaithful to him.

Some translations suggest he was particularly to go and look among those who worked as prostitutes around the Temples of Baal which had become common in the land. Baal was a foreign God who should not have been worshipped at all, but his Temples became places where much trade was done and money was made, so their popularity had spread, certainly in the northern part of the kingdom. The use of prostitutes had become almost a normal part of the activities that went on in and around these Temples.

Or it could simply have been that he was to find a wife from the northern part of the country where moral standards were much lower and women were less likely to be faithful to their husbands. In any case the instructions were clear enough. He was not to find a good woman, but a bad one. And having found her, he was to marry her.

Why? This does not sound like the usual kind of advice that we might expect God to be giving out. Well the message that Hosea was charged with bringing to his people was that they had been unfaithful to him, that they were an unfaithful people. They had been called to be God's people,

but they had been drawn away from the covenant that they had entered into by the attractions that they found in other things.

They had discovered that by making agreements with other nations they could make progress for themselves, and they did that readily, without worrying about what those other nations might be getting up to, and whether or not this was what God was calling them to do. They had discovered the pleasure that comes from being a strong nation with a mighty army, for when they felt powerful they could be independent, they didn't need to depend on God to protect them as they had before. They discovered the pleasure that comes from wealth, the ability it gives you to get what you want and do what you want, and had set about making money with zeal and a commitment that had put their worship and their prayer life well back on their priority list.

We might say they had been seduced by these other attractions and had been draw away from the way they should have been living. Called to be God's people, they had turned their backs on God and given themselves to all sorts of other things. Just as a wife might turn her back on her husband, and find pleasure and fulfillment elsewhere. That was what Hosea was going to preach and proclaim, but words were not going to be enough. He was going to have to demonstrate to the point. He was going to have to live it out.

And if that was going to be painful and humiliating and heartbreaking for him, then he would at least be on the way to understanding the seriousness of having broken their covenant with God, a seriousness which the people seemed oblivious to as they carried on their selfish and indulgent lifestyles. Whatever else you might say about Hosea, you certainly can't doubt his commitment to his calling.

The three children who are born into this troubled marriage are also part of the message. The first son was called "Jezreel" (v. 4). Jezreel was where the kings of the north lived. It was there that after much bloodshed, King Jehu killed Queen Jezebel, and installed himself as king. So the presence of that child would be a constant reminder to the community of the evil

that lay behind the current established order. The daughter's name, "Lo-ruhamah" (v. 6) means *unloved* or *un-pitied*. She would grow up as a reminder to people that God no longer felt any compassion for them. The second son's name, "Lo-ammi" (v. 9) means "not my people". Again he is a living reminder to the community that the God who had called them had become so appalled by their behaviour that he now rejected them.

We can only imagine how these poor souls felt about their names as they went to school and played with their friends, but that is not part of the story. What is part of the story is what happens to the marriage over the first few chapters of the book. We are not given details and we are left to imagine much of it, which may be just as well, but it seems that Gomer did as she was expected to do. She was unfaithful to her husband, finally leaving him to be with another man, or as is implied, several other men. It all looked bleak. It all looked like the end of the relationship, the end of the story.

But then in chapter 3 Hosea is given another command from God. It is not, as we might expect, that he is to give up on her, or divorce her, or denounce her, or find someone better and start again. No, in a twist that is even more shocking than the original instruction, Hosea is told to go and find his wife, and to show love to her once again, even though she is now with another man. Go and find her and love her again, God says, just as I am going to find my people and love them, even though they are worshiping other gods and following other ways.

So he does. He finds her and he pays the man she is now with to buy her back just as he would buy a slave in normal circumstances. It cost him fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. I've no idea if that was a good deal or not but it sounds like a lot to pay for a person who should have been yours in the first place. And of course the amount is not important, what matters is that he was willing to pay whatever it cost. And he told her; from now on you're living with me. No more unfaithfulness, no more sleeping around. You're living with me and I'm living with you.

These are significant words. They point us ahead in the bible to the climax of that much bigger story, when God says in the book of Revelation “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Rev 21:3) These are significant words because they open up the shocking understanding that this story is really about us. For the big story of the bible is that we have all sinned against God and fallen short of what we ought to be. We have been drawn away from our faithfulness to our creator by the attractions we find in power and wealth and worldly goods. No matter what we might say that we believe, the way we spend our time and the way we spend our money demonstrate that worship and prayer and holy service are very low on our priority lists.

And yet, despite our repeated wrong choices, despite our repeated unfaithfulness, God came into our world to look for us. And, in sending his son to die on Calvary's cross, God paid what was needed to buy us back for himself, so that we could be free, so that we could live as we ought, so that we could live with him, and he with us.

On a merely human level, what Hosea did for Gomer was a remarkable act of forgiveness and generosity. But on this other level it is more remarkable still. For Hosea did what he did in order to express God's complete faithfulness to people like us, in order to express the lengths he is willing to go to for people like us.

Later in the book the Prophet addresses other words to his people, words which carry power still as they address us today as they hint at the Christ who was to come:

*"Come, (he wrote) let us return to the Lord.
He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us;
he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.
Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him.
As surely as the sun rises, he will appear".*

This story of the incessant nature of divine love, and the ancient call to respond to his love with our faithfulness is what we still remind ourselves of every time we meet as a church. For it still rings true, and it should still amaze us.