
Love to the Loveless Shown that They May Lovely Be

Hosea 11.1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 1, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The thing about prejudice is that there's just a tiny sliver of truth in it, otherwise it wouldn't be so infuriating. If there weren't, you could just dismiss it as stupid. But prejudice takes a tiny insight and makes it into a colossal generalization that obscures the complexity, texture and goodness of its object.

Many, perhaps most, Christians have a prejudice about the Old Testament. One version is the abiding idea that the God of the Old Testament is a God of war and revenge while the God of the New Testament is a God of peace and love. Another version is that the Old Testament is largely made up of prophecies of Jesus' coming and, once Jesus came, its use is largely to demonstrate that Jesus was part of God's plan all along. Yet another version says that the Old Testament is full of arcane laws and commands and that these are exactly the kind of strictures that the gospel releases us from. There's a sliver of truth in all of these prejudices, which is why they're still around long after they should have been put to bed. But today's reading from the prophet Hosea shows how impoverished all these perceptions of the Old Testament really are. In fact, I think it's no exaggeration to say that if you were going to advise a newcomer to Christianity how to read the Old Testament, you'd best skip Genesis, Exodus and the rest, and start here.

My mother died slowly while I was a teenager. One of the saddest things in my life is that when my mother knew she was going to die, she carefully organized a few things for people after she'd gone. What she did for me was to buy a present for my 21st birthday and write me a letter that I would open on that day. She let my father and I know the location of the present and the card so we knew when and how to find them. The sad thing was that, around a year before I turned 21, while my father and I were out of town on vacation, my father's house was burgled and the 21st birthday present and its letter were among the things that were stolen. So I never read the letter and I never found out what the present was. I've always wondered. I've always somehow assumed that letter would have explained all the mysteries of my mother's life and that the present would have displayed all her hopes for my life.

Just imagine if that were your story and you really did find that letter many years later. Wouldn't you hold it reverently in two hands, as if blessed by its wondrous existence, its miraculous reappearance in your life after all these years? Wouldn't you have butterflies in your stomach hoping it wouldn't tell you a secret you wished you'd never known or turn out to be very ordinary and prosaic? Wouldn't you expect reading it to be one of the most revealing moments of your life, a moment when timeless wisdom and personal passion met on a single page? That's the state of mind we need to be in as we read these words of the prophet Hosea.

What Hosea gives us is a letter from God saying to Israel, "This is what it's been like over all these centuries to have a child like you." And this is an amazing thing in many ways. Step back and reflect for a moment on the ways we talk about having children in our culture. We understand, first of all, how many people long to have children. We feel sympathetic when a friend, especially a female friend, is single, and realize singleness doesn't just mean not having a spouse but can even more acutely mean not having the experience of bearing and raising children. We try to say the right thing when a couple don't seem to be having children, carefully wanting to affirm career and financial concerns and occasionally mumbling letters like "IVF" or words like "adoption" if we feel there's enough trust and understanding around. A profound yearning for children is something we seldom question. Then twenty or so years later we anticipate good news of college places taken up and graduations attended and proud-hearted parents not wanting to take the credit but selflessly paying the bills for education and experience and a start in life and a lot to look forward to.

But in between, how much do we really give one another space to identify and explain what being a parent is really like? It seems we're all desperate to show one another what good parents we are, by the faultless

manners of our children in public, by their exemplary school results, by the designer quality of their athletic prowess and by our success in convincing the grandparents of their unswerving virtue. But where and when do we say how much a parent shouts, how much a parent weeps, how much a parent feels isolated and alone and a failure and a fool?

Some while ago I sat down with a friend and he told me what it'd really been like with his teenage son. How his son lied to him. How his son wasted his brains and couldn't get into the rhythm of junior high school. How he started taking various substances. How he stole money from his parents. How it felt like his son was beyond his reach – tremendous fun and good company about one day in five, but far away most of the time and sometimes a complete demon. I said to my friend, "How much was your sense of failure part of you and your wife splitting up, now you look back?" He shook his head, adamantly, but when he opened his mouth to deny it, no words came out. And then we reached that moment you sometimes get between two men with a pint of beer in their hand when, however well you know each other, you're not really allowed to do tears, so you put down your drink and tell a joke instead. "Why did God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac when he was 12 years old?" my friend asked me. I shrugged my shoulders. "Because if he'd waited till he was 13 it wouldn't have been a sacrifice." This is a man who's had more professional recognition than most of us could dream of, but deep down his experience of being a parent had unravelled every fragile and unresolved quality of his character and exposed every tiny inconsistency in his soul, leaving him with the self-esteem of a mashed potato.

This is the kind of story Hosea records God telling about what it was like to be Israel's parent all those years. But it's not a simple tale of woe. It comes in four distinct parts, and I want to look at those four parts with you for a moment because they give a profound shape to the story. The story starts in the past, moves into the present, and finishes in the future, and offers us a model of how we might tell our own stories in a similar way.

Let's look at what God says about the past. "When Israel was a child, I *loved* him." A tiny child can call out the deepest feelings of pride and protection and heart-bursting wonder and joy. Feel God's chest filling with emotion as you ponder these words: "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk." (Ephraim is another name for the Northern Kingdom that split from Judah after the death of Solomon.) "I took them up in my arms." It's like an old cine-camera recording of a child's first steps. "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." God is making an analogy between the reins you put on a child as it's learning to potter around on its two feet and the demonstrations of love God made to Israel that kept Israel steady on its feet in the early days. "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." You can feel God stroking Israel's soft skin and getting out the little spoon and trying to put some liquidized food in Israel's mouth as it sits in its high chair. What a tender scene.

But then the picture shifts to Israel's present. And suddenly the mood changes and it's like we're in the bar with my friend and he's telling me about what his son gets up to when he's supposed to be at junior high school. You can see God hunched forward, head in hands, saying these words. "The more I called them, the more they went from me... they kept offering incense to idols... they have refused to return to me. ... My people are bent on turning away from me." And God is under no illusions that turning a blind eye will make such things go away by themselves. This delinquency has consequences. The people are already facing, or are going to face, exile, and conquest, and slavery, and civil war. God is devastated to see the way the intimacy of parent and infant child has got to this terrible state.

And then we come to the third picture, the most poignant one of all. We're given the awesome privilege of a window into the heart of God. And in that heart we see an all-night struggle between sober, realistic pragmatism, passionate, wild fury, and overwhelming, tender compassion. "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" says God. "How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." How many parents know what such inconsolable soul-searching feels like? But God emerges from it with a firm conviction. "I will *not* execute my fierce anger; I will *not* again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will *not* come in wrath." This is God's present tense, as the Old

Testament most acutely describes it. Torn between wrath and mercy, knowing that mercy will cost not less than everything.

And finally we get a glimpse into God and Israel's future. God will be like a lion, who will roar, and God's children, Israel, will come trembling from the four corners to which they had dispersed, and be reunited with one another, with their homes, and with God. Israel will be as timid and tentative as cooing doves in the face of the mighty roar of God. There's no question Israel's return will be God's doing. But like the prodigal son returning to the father, Israel will come back from exile and be reunited in God's home and in God's heart.

I wonder if there's a word of hope for you in this story. I wonder if you know what it means to have a child, or maybe another person whom you love, follow a self-destructive path which hurts themselves, hurts those around them and maybe hurts you more than they ever seem to be able to comprehend. No doubt your own positive or negative experience of being a child or a parent shapes the way you hear this story. I wonder where you are in this story right now. Are you thinking back to the beautiful, tender times? Or maybe you're right in the thick of the terrible tormented times. Or perhaps you're experiencing the sleepless nights and restless torment of not knowing whether to follow wrath or mercy, whether to try yet another one last chance or whether to say you've had it with them and there's no way back. I wonder if there's consolation in God's words of reunion in the future – not a reunion maybe you can envisage right now, but one that God will bring as irresistibly as a roaring lion.

I want to take you back to that lost letter that my mother wrote me when I was a teenager. I've come to believe that in fact I have read that letter. I don't mean the letter wasn't really stolen or that it miraculously appeared. I mean that this is that letter. Hosea chapter 11 is that lost letter. Hosea 11 is what my mother wanted to tell me with her dying words. Not that she'd been a patient parent and I'd been her wayward child. Not that I would one day have to experience what it means to be a parent whose child breaks their heart. Not even that Hosea is every parent's story. None of those things. What matters about Hosea 11 is precisely that it's *God's* story. And in that story it turns out I'm not the longsuffering parent. I'm the destructive child. Hosea isn't a generalized picture of the woes of parenthood. It's a poem and a prayer and a promise from God that says "You're my beloved child and you've wandered and strayed and I'm in pieces, but one day you'll be reunited with God, although you'll never know how much it cost me to make it so."

That's what I think my mother wanted to tell me. Not that she gave everything for me – but that God did, and still does, and always will. Those words tell me who I am and who God is. If you wrote a last, secret letter to your child or loved one, I wonder what you'd write in it. I think I know what I'd write in mine. I'd write the words of Hosea chapter 11.