

Simon Barnes, the chief sports writer for "The Times" newspaper in London, some years ago wrote a moving article, "I'm not a saint, just a parent". It is about being the father of his second son, Eddie, who has Down's syndrome. In it, he talks very candidly about the challenges, but also the joys, of being Eddie's father. At one point he says: "If you find the idea of love uncomfortable or sentimental or best not talked about or existing only in the midst of a passionate love affair, then you will find problems with what I am writing. I am writing of love not as a matter of grand passions, or as high-falutin idealism or as religion I am talking about love as the stuff that makes the processes of human nature happen; the love that moves the sun and other stars, which is also the love that makes the toast and other snacks. Love is the most humdrum thing in life, the only thing that matters, the thing that is forever beyond the reach of human imagination".

Barnes makes the powerful point that real love is not the love of infatuation or the heart flutter at extreme beauty or the fun of dressing up and going out. Real love is about making toast and cups of tea, of caring for sick children, or for loved ones who can't remember you anymore. Real love is love that perseveres. That is the sort of love that the prophet Hosea writes about – God's love that never lets go. God's love is not something that he falls into or out of, but rather, despite the pain of rejection, his love patiently pursues his beloved – never giving up and never letting go – until the object of his love joins their love with his.

The prophecy of Hosea comes first in the biblical order of the Minor Prophets, the collection of the final 12 books of the Old Testament. And that is rightly so. It is not the first of the 12 either to be written or spoken, but it is first in regard to its message. James Montgomery Boice, senior minister of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, who died in 2000, suggests that it is the second greatest story in the Bible.

Hosea was a prophet in the 8th century BC, during the reigns of 4 successive kings of Judah – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – and during the reign of Jeroboam II, one of the kings of Israel. His prophecy was primarily directed to the northern kingdom of Israel. It must have been a long period of ministry – perhaps 50 years or more – but we are told nothing about Hosea's life during those years except the poignant story found in chapters 1-3 of the book bearing his name. The age in which Hosea prophesied was much like our own age and thus the lessons of his story are those we also need to hear. Hosea lived at the same time as Isaiah (who prophesied to Judah in the south) and Amos (who visited the northern kingdom of Israel from the rural area of Tekoa). It is from these three prophets that we learn what the characteristics of this age were. To many the period must have appeared to be a good one indeed. It was an age of luxurious materialism, apparent religious devotion and activity, freedom, and even an apparent national security in which politics, law and religion all seemed to play into the favoured people's hands. Amos is particularly clear in diagnosing this spirit. Yet, as Isaiah, Amos and Hosea also show, it was the worst of times because the hearts of the people were empty, religion was shallow, and there was much corruption. In particular, law was manipulated to the advantage of the rich, and much, if not most, of the religious activity was mere show. Hosea's cry is that the people have been unfaithful to God, just as an adulterous wife is unfaithful to her husband. The one great sin of which the Lord, through Hosea, accuses Israel is unfaithfulness. God has blessed his people – prospered them both materially and spiritually. But they had begun to live for pleasure. They had abandoned hard work, morality, and integrity in order to live for themselves. What a parallel to our age in the early decades of the 21st Century! However, the long reign of Jeroboam II was nearly over. In the north, Assyria was rousing itself and would soon move south to destroy Israel in 724-722BC. Israel's fate as a nation was in the balance. So to this nation that was cold and indifferent to him, God sent the prophet Hosea with a message of love. The book of Hosea can be split into 2 parts. In chapters 1-3 Israel's and Yahweh's (God's) relationship is pictured. In chapters 4-14 Israel's and Yahweh's (God's) relationship is explained.

1. Israel's and God's Relationship Pictured (chs 1-3)

In chapters 1-3 we have Israel's and God's love pictured in the tragic breakdown of a marriage. It would seem that God came to Hosea, no doubt early in his life, to ask him to do a very difficult thing. God said, "Hosea, I want you to marry a woman who is going to prove unfaithful to you but to whom you are nevertheless going to be faithful. You will love her, but she will disgrace your love. I am asking you to do this because we are to present a pageant to Israel by your marriage. It is going to be symbolic, an object lesson. You are going to play the part of God. Your wife is going to play the part of my people. The reason she is going to run away and be unfaithful is that this is the way my people act in the spiritual marriage that I have established with them. You are going to be faithful, because I am faithful to Israel even though she dishonours my name". So Hosea is told to marry a wife who will be unfaithful to him and to have children with her. The reason given is "because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord (1:2). God often asked his prophets to picture their messages through their actions. For example, Ezekiel was told to pack his belongings and dig through the wall of the city while the people were watching, to demonstrate that they were going off into exile. But no prophet was ever given an assignment as heart-rending as Hosea's. He did what he was told and married Gomer. She conceived and bore him a son. Then the Lord said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the Kingdom of Israel. In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel" (1:4-5).

The first of these children seems to have Hosea as his father because the text says, "she bore him a son" (1:3). That is probably not the case for the next two children. In verse 6 of chapter 1, she conceived again and gave birth to a daughter who was named Lo-Ruhammah. Then in verse 8, after she had weaned Lo-Ruhammah, she had another son who was to be called Lo-Ammi. The names God told Hosea to give his children are names that shock. They are names that convey judgment – and the warnings of judgment increase in severity with each new child. Jezreel means "scattered". Lo-Ruhammah means "not loved". And Lo-Ammi means "not my people". This dysfunctional marriage and family powerfully and poignantly picture Israel's relationship with Yahweh. They are unfaithful. They have raced off after other gods and forsaken the one true God, their covenant partner, Yahweh. The fruit of that unfaithfulness will be judgment – a people scattered to the nations, a people who are not loved and forsaken as God's people. It's a tragic picture. But it gets worse because in chapter 3, although Gomer has been unfaithful to Hosea and has no doubt broken his heart, he is told to go and buy her back – either by paying a prostitute's fee for her, or else purchasing her from the slave market:

""The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes". So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you"" (3:1-3). After buying her back, Hosea betrothes her to himself in faithfulness. Hosea pictures for us in a most compelling way God's amazing love for his people. Hosea goes and buys back his own wife: he forgives her past and instructs her to be faithful from now on. What we see here is not a love that is romantic or trivial, but a love that is costly. This is God's love for his wayward people. God's love doesn't give up. It doesn't say, "I don't love you any more", although it has every justification to do so. Rather it is a love that persists and pursues.

2. Israel's and God's Relationship Explained (chs 4-14)

The remaining chapters of the book describe the relationship of Yahweh and Israel by drawing on the same imagery used in the first 3 chapters of the book: that of an adulterous relationship. Hosea first of all makes a statement, which is essentially a charge against the people: ""Hear the word of

(Hosea 1:1-2:1; 4:10-14; 14:1-7; Romans 5:6-8)

the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed" (4:1-3). The core of this charge is that there is no faithfulness to, or love for, God in the land.

The charge is then filled out in more detail in the rest of chapter 4 and in subsequent chapters: Israel's lack of faith and of love for God shows itself in a love of other gods and other nations. Like Gomer, Israel races off after other gods – gods of wood and stone – the worship of whom involves them in fertility cults with their associated cultic prostitution. Hosea speaks of this in the passage we read from Hosea 4:10-14. Not only was the nation allying itself with foreign gods, but also coupling itself with foreign powers, rather than relying on God (Yahweh) to rescue them: "Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless – now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria" (7:11). It is clear in this section that God crafts the punishment for his people to fit their crimes. They have pursued other lovers (gods) so their punishment is that these unions will not be fruitful. They will have wombs that miscarry and breasts that are dry (9:14). And if they have children, they will be slain (9:16). Similarly, God tells them that their continued love for foreign nations will result in their defeat by those very nations; "Israel is swallowed up; now she is among the nations like a worthless thing" (8:8).

Although they will be punished for their sin, they ought not to doubt God's deep love for them. His love is constant and strong – surely God will never say to his people, "I don't love you any more"? This is given powerful expression in chapter 11 of Hosea: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel? How can I treat you like Adnah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (11:8). Although God will punish Israel for their sin, he is not punishing them as an enemy but as a loving father who wants the best for his children. The same reminder is given to Christians in the New Testament by the writer of Hebrews: "And you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son". Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons" (Hebrews 12:5-7a). In that hard love God wants to bring a harvest of righteousness and peace in our lives (Hebrews 12:11).

Though the Israelites will go off into exile, exile is not designed to be the end. There is a way of return: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips" (14:1-2). The way of return is through words of repentance. Not the type of repentance depicted in the early verses of chapter 6 where there is no true acknowledgment of sin, no genuine sorrow for sin and there is a presumption that God will pardon because he always does (6:1-2). Rather, there is to be a genuine brokenness and sorrow over their sins and a returning to the Lord and his ways. They have sinned and chased after other lovers just as Gomer did. But if they return to God with genuine words of repentance, seeking God's forgiveness, he will forgive all their sins and graciously receive them – indeed offer them healing and restoration, as we read in 14:4-7.

Hosea depicts the costly love of God in a most powerful way. The image of Hosea, whose name means "salvation", scraping together his money, and heading off in the depths of the night to the red light district to buy back his own wife, is a picture of incredible love! But it is, as J.M. Boice says, only the second greatest story in the Bible. The greatest story is the gospel: God in his incredible love sending his own Son Jesus into the world to pursue men and women – and then having found them, giving up his own life to death on a cross to purchase them for God. As Paul writes: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will

(Hosea 1:1-2:1; 4:10-14; 14:1-7; Romans 5:6-8)

anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). Indeed, what is the story of Hosea if it is not the story of ourselves as members of that body, the church, which is the bride of Christ? We are Gomer, and God is Hosea. He married us when we were unclean. He knew we would prove unfaithful again and again. He knew that we would forsake him. Still he loved us and redeemed us to himself through Christ's sacrificial death. He has purchased us for himself to be a bride "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27) – and he has done this even though he knew in advance that we would often prove faithless.

There are lessons here for those who are Christians. You may not have run so far from God as Gomer ran from Hosea. You may not have been so unfaithful as to deny him and seek other gods. But you have certainly flirted with other gods. You have taken the selfless and sacrificial and abundant love of your great bridegroom and lover Jesus Christ with less obedience and respect than he deserves. You have been half-hearted in your love. You have disgraced his name in small ways if not large ones. Repent. Learn what a horror spiritual adultery is, and flee from it to Christ. Enjoy the embrace of Christ. Tell him of your love. Do not continue in disobedience.

There are also encouragements here for those who are not yet Christians. If you are not a Christian, you have never known a love like this. You may be wondering if it is possible for someone like yourself to be loved by God in this way. If so, know that what you feel of your own inadequacies is true of all who are brought into God's spiritual family. We were all in fellowship with God once....in Adam. Since then we have gone our own way. We may be described as "Scattered", "Not-loved", "Not-God's People". It is for people like us that Christ died. If you are touched by this story and sense that Christ died for you, then do not let thoughts of your own inadequacies or past sins hold you back. Run to him. Believe on him. Know for yourself that Christ's love really is as the story of Hosea and Gomer describes it.

The story of every person who has ever been saved is the same: "Scattered!" "Not-Loved!" "Not-My-People!". But now, through Jesus Christ, "Planted!" "Loved!" "The People of God!".

Amen

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