

Meditation (24 July 2022)

In the lectionary this week we have some intimidating readings. We have a reading from Hosea about his call to marry a woman who will betray him. And we have one of Paul's amazing but intense descriptions of life in Christ. You may be wondering, why are *these* passages chosen to be read together? How can they possibly relate to one another? Well, I believe there is a link. And the link is this: a good beginning is not the end. A good beginning is not the end.

Let me explain... In many fairy tales, the story often ends with the handsome prince and the beautiful princess getting married "and they lived happily ever after". Those are the stories we grow up with, but we all know that this is not really reality. The wedding at the end of the fairy tale is really just a starting point. There is a whole lifetime of the joys and challenges of married life ahead of them...

A marriage that starts well...

This is how the book of Hosea starts. With a marriage. Hosea is God's prophet to the people of Israel, and he is given a very unusual assignment. Instead of passing on God's message verbally to the people or to the King, Hosea is told by God to marry. And he is told specifically to marry a promiscuous woman, a woman who is not known for her faithfulness. Hosea's marriage is his message. His lived experience is his prophecy.

The marriage starts well. Hosea and Gomer soon find themselves expecting a child. Verse 3 says, "she conceived and bore him a son". The writer of the Book of Hosea makes it clear that the child was Hosea's. As far as we can see, it is evidence of a faithful marriage.

As we heard in the All-Age Activity, the naming of Hosea and Gomer's children was itself a prophetic act. The names of the children were *chosen by God* to speak of the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

The name that God chooses for this first child is Jezreel. And God uses this child's name to remind the people of his power and his desire for justice. For those of you in the Bible Study Group, you will remember that something happened in Jezreel. Bad King Ahab and his wife Jezebel framed and murdered Naboth to get his vineyard at Jezreel.

So far so good.

But a good beginning is not the end.

Unfaithfulness and betrayal

Suspicions of unfaithfulness in the marriage creep in. In Verse 6, a second child is born, but this time there is no clear sign that Hosea was the father. This child, born out of unfaithfulness, God names "Not Loved". Other versions translate the name as "No Mercy". Can you imagine giving a child such a name?! The essence of parental love for a child is denied. Gomer's betrayal strikes discord into the marriage. The people of God, the kingdom of Israel, have betrayed their God by seeking after other gods.

The betrayal continues. A third child is conceived, again presumably outside of the marriage. Another devastating name: Not My People. God's term of endearment used so often for the people of Israel was "my people". These treasured people who God had nurtured so carefully had spat back in his face. Love rejected. Guidance ignored. And with utter sadness, God calls them Not My People.

A marriage that started well had gone sour. Faithfulness and dedication was soon overshadowed by betrayal. God's beloved people were no longer "his people".

The important word 'yet'

And *yet*. Verse 10: this important word 'yet'. A turning point. A way back. An opportunity for reconciliation. A reconnection. A recommitment. A marriage renewed. A relationship restored. A new name. Not My People becomes "my people" once again.

And how did this happen? Who made the first move? Let's look at our reading of Psalm 85. Verse 2: "*The Lord* forgave the iniquity of his people." God pardoned all their sin. Whatever the unfaithfulness of Gomer, Hosea continues to love her. Whatever the idolatry of the people of Israel, God's anger doesn't last. God offers the hand of peace. God risks to love. God offers a way to save the relationship.

God wanted Hosea to know of his despair. God wanted Hosea to know the bitter sting of unrequited love. God wanted Hosea to know the deep pain of what it's like to see those who once worshiped, praised, and celebrated you abandon you to false gods. And Hosea learned that God's love and forgiveness are stronger than Israel's mistakes. This lived experience, this suffering and heartache, was the grounding for Hosea's prophetic ministry. Hosea would now be able to speak from the heart, with deep conviction and tenderness, whenever he shared God's message of redemptive healing. His message was that the people of Israel could look forward to a day when God would bless them and Israel could again be called "children of the living God."

Under such a restored relationship, can you imagine what any future children of Hosea and Gomer might be called? Taking inspiration from Psalm 85, how about the names Blessing, Favour, Forgiven, Pardoned, Salvation, Peace, Beloved, Glory, Faithful, Righteous, Goodness, Abundance. Can you imagine such a family?!

What about us?

But how does this relate to us? I'm not suggesting that this passage from Hosea should be taken as advice for how to choose a life partner, or even as suggestions for baby names!

This passage tells the story of Israel's rejection of God, and God's limitless love and unquenchable forgiveness. But this passage also tells the story of *humanity's* rejection of God, and God's limitless love and unquenchable forgiveness. And even, of *our* rejection of God.

We are offered a fresh start: God loves us despite our rejection and betrayal

In our lives, when we betray God by our selfish choices, our hard heartedness, our pride, our lack of compassion for those around us... God offers a hand of peace. God forgives. God is always faithful. God wants to mend the relationship and bring us back into his embrace. And he shows this most concretely through coming to earth as a man. God's son, Jesus Christ, demonstrated the lengths that God would go to win us back to him, so that we can be called Children Of The Living God.

This is what is important for us: God offers us a great beginning. A fresh start.

Let me draw your attention to our New Testament reading in Colossians 2. Verses 13-14:

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

This is our good news. And Paul, writing to a group of Christians in Colossae, wanted to remind them of this important truth. Paul encourages us to remember the promises that God has made to you and you to him. Remember the fullness by which you have been saved. Fully alive with Christ. Sins forgiven. Debt cancelled. Evil disarmed. Cross triumphant.

A whole life rooted in Christ

But remember, a good beginning is not the end. There's more to the Christian life than a moment of salvation. There's a whole life to be lived following Jesus. What started well needs to be completed well too.

The Christians in Colossae had started well in their new Christian faith, but maybe they had then got distracted. Maybe they had lost sight of God, turned to other beliefs, somehow betrayed God. Just like the marriage between Hosea and Gomer. It had started well but there was unfaithfulness.

Paul writes to them (verses 6-7):

⁶ So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Be rooted in Christ, like a strong tree.
Be built up in Christ, like a solid building.

The marriage vow is just the beginning. Our baptism, our first confession of faith is just the beginning.

We live in this 'yet' moment of Hosea 1:10. We were called Not My People yet now we are called Children Of The Living God. We may still betray the love of God, yet we can call ourselves blessed, forgiven, pardoned, saved.

The faith that started well can endure for a lifetime. Because God reaches out a hand of peace.

Here's a question for you: How have you been prepared and built-up for life as a Christian? How has God equipped you for the task given to your hands? Maybe for a prophetic ministry of sharing God's message with the people around you? What are the experiences that have touched your heart deeply, the sufferings that only God was able to heal, that means you have the conviction and the tenderness to reach out to others in similar situations?

Conclusion

We've looked at the prophet Hosea's prophetic marriage that spoke of the relationship between God and his people. The relationship started well, but soon it was tainted by betrayal. Gomer slept with other men. Israel worshipped false gods. And God's devastation is shown in the names he gives to the children born through Gomer's unfaithfulness: the children called Not Loved and Not My People.

But our readings don't leave us in this place of devastation. Hosea's story contains an important "yet". A turning point, a way back. Our Psalm reading spoke of the loving and forgiving nature of God towards his people. Despite the betrayal, Not My People becomes "my people" once again. Has anything changed? Has Gomer turned over a new leaf? Will the people of Israel live a perfect life worshipping God foreverafter? Will we live perfect sin-free lives? Most probably not.

Yet with the help of God's Spirit, we can follow Jesus in our everyday lives. With the help of God's Spirit, we can receive God's love and share that love with others in our normal lives. Rooted and built-up in Christ.

With God we have a great beginning. With God, we are offered the hand of peace. Let us now choose to root ourselves in Christ, to live each day as Children Of The Living God.

Amen