

BEING GOD

Hosea 11:1-11

Colossians 2:20-3:4

Human relationships are complicated, and perhaps most of all the relationship between a parent and a child. For one thing, it keeps changing, as the child grows and matures and struggles towards independence. The parent, who is already grown and is, perhaps, changing less quickly now, often cannot keep up with what seems natural for the child. How often does a growing child - a teenager perhaps, or even younger, or indeed older - complain bitterly that they aren't given freedom, aren't given respect as an individual, aren't given choices or privacy? How often did you rail against your parents? "Do you need to know what I'm doing and thinking every minute of the day?" I remember demanding of my poor mother. Maybe in your heart (even if not out loud) you still protest. It is so hard for a parent to forget that their child was a tiny baby, dependant on them for every thing, and so the usual tendency of parents is to be what the child thinks of as over-protective.

And yet the parent only wants to give love, and possibly be loved in return. The parent can't understand when the growing child rejects offers of help or advice which are simply made in love and concern. And it was ever thus. "*When Israel was a child,*" says God, "*I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*" God in love brought his people out of bondage, brought them to the freedom of his love. But, "*The more I called them, the more they went from me...*" So many parents know that feeling. Well, God knows it too.

It is not a mere statement of exasperation, either. If you read the history of the Old Testament, you will see that the people were rarely faithful, and the more that God send prophets or faithful kings and leaders, the more the reaction was to turn away. And it is the reaction of normal children today as well. We have to make our own mistakes, and when we are young we are keen to do so.

But today we hear first of all God's parental lament. He remembers back - I taught them to walk, I picked them up when they fell, I kissed and cuddled them and gave them a sense of worth. Why I even fed them, bottle by bottle, spoon by spoon. But now they don't care.

This passage in Hosea has strong echoes of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father is wounded when the son demands his freedom, and the inheritance that he would get on his dad's death. But he lets his child have what he wants and of course the son is not ready to make wise choices about what to do and wastes the lot and becomes destitute. And now the son is afraid to come home. He knows that he has done wrong. He knows that he has effectively cut himself out of the family. He knows that simple justice would not only permit but demand that his father would have no more to do with him. So when he comes home he does so with the plea that he be allowed to join the servants, not the family. He is not a parent, you see. He doesn't know that the way of the world does not always apply to parents.

However God goes on to remind his people what ought to happen to them, in simple justice. He has brought them out of Egypt, out of bondage, but if they keep on turning away from him, then simple justice says that he should send them back there - back into bondage to a foreign power, whether Egypt or Assyria - both were threatening

the nation at that time. Simple justice - human justice, the justice of the world - demands that the time should come when they call to their God, to their parent, and the answer should be that they have been helped out once too often, that it's time they took responsibility for their actions, that they lie in the bed they have made, that they stew in their own juices.

Of course, in the human world, there are times when that is the right answer for a parent to make. There may be times when always bailing out your wastrel son or spendthrift daughter is not the loving thing to do, because then they will never learn to live without you, and what will they do when you're gone? I will never forget the anguish of one man who told me that his wife had been secretly funding a son with their life savings, behind his back. The action had ruined the son and when it was discovered, it killed the marriage as well.

So God speaks with what we would call the voice of tough love. He is going to let them know the consequences of their actions. Or is he?

The thing about parents making judgements such as this is that it hurts. It hurts the child, and it hurts the parent as well. It means that the parent has to take the risk that their child will never speak to them again, or may even go to disaster of one sort or another. But if calling them back, bailing them out again and again hasn't led to a change in behaviour, what else can be done?

That is what justice demands. That is the way of worldly wisdom. That is what human love would do. But contemplating it, God is in anguish. And the suffering of God that we see in Hosea today, anticipates the suffering of Christ in Gethsemane and Calvary. The suffering that knows that if justice is to be satisfied but love is to win out then the judge must take the pain. It is the pain of having to go through with what is painful to oneself for love of the other. God will take the rejection, Christ will take the agony and death. Why? Because *"I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."* (v:9).

God is not like us. A couple of weeks ago when I asked the children what God was good at, one reply was "Being God." I think that probably that was a bit of an "I can't think" reply, but it was absolutely spot on. God is good at being God and that is why when he is faced with the fierce call for justice he chooses to temper it with love. He is not like us - though we are made to be like him. He is not fallen, not pulled down by sinfulness. The laws of actions and consequences which apply to us, do not need to apply to him. And so God's compassion wins over his justice, because that's what being God means.

Being God means satisfying justice with love, and going on loving and loving, and not giving in to anger. Being God means working against the way of the fallen world to redeem a beloved people from it. Being God means being bigger than we expect, bigger in acceptance, in suffering, in love. No wonder our proper response is to fall down in worship, and to return love for love as we turn back to God.

Which brings us to the letter to the Colossians. Have you ever been in a one way system and been able to see where you want to get to, but been denied going there by what seems an obvious, direct route by the traffic rules? It can happen a lot in Galashiels, especially if you find yourself just beyond where you want to go in the circular route through the town. There is usually a reason for such seemingly obstructive rules (though the reason

can be hard to fathom at times), and if you try to bypass them and go direct you will end up in a worse pickle than before. You might even find yourself heading up a dead-end.

Paul is talking to people who have realised where they want to go to: they want to get to God, this God of love who goes on caring when others give up, who takes the suffering himself to spare his children. Who wouldn't want to get there?

The people who want to get to God have turned from their old selfish, pagan way of doing things, but now they are being tempted by another route, seemingly simple and direct, but not at all what it seems. They are being tempted to take up a list of dos and don'ts to get to God. It seems straightforward. You don't handle this, you don't taste the other and you don't touch some things at all. It calls for great self-discipline, but surely with such discipline must come spiritual growth?

Paul's point is that it may feel that way, but actually it is as much a set of wrong turnings and blind alleys as the route of selfishness that they are turning from. It's still dealing with the things of the world in the way of the world. It is giving up worldly self-indulgence of a sensual kind for worldly self-indulgence of a spiritual kind. But that is not what we are called to by the endless love of God in Christ.

Instead we are to remember that we are already in Christ. We died with him to the life of the world and the ways of the world, and have been raised with him, so that his life is in us. That being so we are free to make the choices God makes. We are free to choose not to invoke retribution when the world thinks it is the only response. We are free to forgive, free not to become angry, free always to respond to life with love.

One of the big points in Jesus' teaching was surely that this is how his disciples ought to act, ought to be known. Remember the parable of the unforgiving servant, who was forgiven so much and would not let go of a much smaller debt that he in turn was owed. Remember how in the end he was heaved out of the circle of the King's love and mercy? Remember how Jesus taught us to pray, asking for forgiveness as we forgive those who offend against us? Jesus was telling his friends, was telling us, that we are called to model God's love, God's forgiveness, God's way of doing things which is bigger than people expect - bigger in acceptance, in forgiveness, in suffering and in love.

"I am God and not a human being" cries God in the pages of Hosea. As we are united with Christ, this is our identity as well. We are in Christ. By his Spirit we have his life, his nature and his calling. To forgive, to go on loving, to be bigger than expectation. Only that way do we show who lives in us, and who we serve.