

## BE A HOSEA

Hosea 1:1-11, 2:16-23

Matthew 5:43-48

Hosea, the man who made his life the message. What must it have been like for him, I wonder? Try putting yourself in his place for a while. We're not told in what way God spoke to him. It may have been in a definite, audible voice, but it may not. It may well have been the way most of us hear God, in a growing conviction, over time. Let's imagine how it could have happened.

Hosea, a young farmer, say, is walking through the market-place one day, going to get some provisions for himself. As he goes he notices, he can't help but notice, the shrine erected to Baal. He turns his head away. He is faithful to the one true God and he is not happy with the way that so many of his people try to placate this mythical Baal as well as worshipping Yahweh. But even as he turns away he notices a young woman by the shrine, an attractive young woman. Pity that such a girl should go astray, he thinks.

Later Hosea has a drink with some friends. He finds the conversation is growing a little ribald, as it sometimes will with young men. He's not really listening, though, because he has been thinking about the face of that girl he saw by the shrine. Suddenly he realises that the woman one of his friends is talking about is the prostitute attached to the worship of Baal at that shrine, and it's none other than the girl he's thinking of. A cultic prostitute, thinks Hosea, well, that's that.

But as time goes on he finds himself looking for her face when he comes to the market-place. He no longer turns away from the shrine, just so that he might see her. He finds himself making up reasons to come to town more and more often. One day, when no one is around, he gets up courage and talks with her - just talks. Soon a word or two of greeting is part of his almost-daily routine. All this time, as a man of faith, Hosea has been praying about the situation. A clear-sighted man, not given to hiding from the truth, it is obvious to him that he has fallen in love with this "fallen woman", this symbol of abominable worship. He loves the woman but her way of life appals him. In the end he realises that the only way to help Gomer to rise above what she is, is to prove that someone loves her for more than an hour or so, for someone to prove that he loves her for herself, not for her ritual significance; it's for someone to marry her.

After all, isn't that not really what God has done for Hosea and all his people? Hasn't God allied himself with a sinful and rebellious people by means of an eternal covenant - just like a marriage covenant?

As Hosea continues to consult with God over things, he becomes convinced that God would have him marry this woman, though he knows it won't make for an easy life. Moreover he sees that God wants him to make the ups and downs of his love public, to help others see how great is God's love for his people. People need a visual aid. Hosea can be that illustration. Think of the wonderful responsibility - and of the strength of will it must have taken. No doubt Hosea's friends would not think any better of him for marrying Gomer. He would be the subject of gossip, and the butt of jokes. But if he is to be God's illustration, then he knows that this must be. People must talk about him, or the point will be missed. Could you take on that call? Could you be a Hosea?

Time goes by and the children arrive. Children are always a gift to preachers - the things they say or do that illustrate points we want to make about human nature and so

on. Hosea used his children to make points as well, but not in quite the usual preacherly way. He does it by their names.

Nowadays names are more diverse than they used to be, but still we can be amazed or amused by the names people choose - "Peaches" or "Apple" come to mind. Or how about that couple who tried to name their son after an entire football team to show their allegiance?

Hosea calls his first child Jezreel - which is a place name: a bit like calling your daughter Iona, or Isla, and there's a boy called Coll in Stow school. But Jezreel was a place with a very definite historical past. It was a place of massacre. To call your son that was the equivalent of naming him Glencoe, or even Auschwitz. Jezreel was where first a King and later 70 of his sons were hewn down so that Jehu, founder of the current Israelite dynasty, could become King instead. Jehu was supposed to bring the people back to God, but he and his heirs had done the opposite, so now Jezreel was a name associated with both blood and apostasy. The associations were unpleasant.

The next child was to be called Not-pitied, and the third Not-my people. The message was clear. God had had enough. He had forgiven again and again, but nothing ever got better. He no longer felt inclined to have pity of his people, or even to acknowledge them as his people at all.

And yet. And yet. That is the message of Hosea: and yet. The tone of our reading, and of the whole of this book is infinitely sad. Sometimes it is angry as well, but always it is sad. Always you hear the broken heart of the deserted husband, who still loves his wife no matter what she does. Always you hear the sadness of God at the behaviour of his people, as they are not faithful to him, as they pay him just lip-service, then go off and lead their lives just as before, as they openly turn from him and scorn him. There is such sadness, there are these declarations that he has had enough, but always it comes back to this: and yet.

And yet God loves. There may be judgement for a while, but only to win the people back, only to show that the love and faithfulness is still there and still demands recognition. There is sadness in this book, but there is always hope as well.

In the end great shall be the day of Jezreel, in the end the promise that the people will outnumber the sand of the sea - the same promise that was given to Abraham, the original marriage covenant, is reiterated, in the end God is confident that his people will give up their profligate ways, and he will feel able to reward them with blessing, and have pity on them after all, and call them his people again.

Hosea and his family were to be a visual aid. The children were to remind people of their faithlessness, and of God's impatience with it. But Hosea was to be a visual aid of God's love for his unfaithful people. We human beings need to see things in order to understand fully. There came a time in history when this was most clearly shown. God sent his Son to die for us, to show us how much he cares for us. Christ was more than a visual aid of God's love: he was God's love, made flesh and walking the earth; sharing in life and sharing in death; ushering in a new age of life by returning from death never to die again. Christ was God's love, and people could see it and touch it and hear it.

And that is our calling as well. The calling of a Hosea, the calling of Christ, to show

God's love to the world. Ours is a calling to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect. In other words, we are to mirror the essence and actions and attitudes of God, and God is love. Whether it is in the area of family relationships, or in any other way that we encounter people, known or unknown, friend or enemy, we are to mirror God's love to them. It's a very, very tall order. Often we will fall down and fail, and just as often we will need to come to God and confess. But as we go through our days, we can keep asking ourselves the questions: what would Jesus do here? How would Jesus treat this person, this situation?

What will such God-mirroring love look like? It can take many forms. It is present in the decisions we make about how we spend our time and money: are we doing it in a selfish way or a way that enhances the lives of others? What choices will show God's love?

Mirroring God's love with individuals will sometimes take the form of spending time with a person when you would rather be alone, or be almost anywhere else; or it may mean being alone because you know the person you would rather be with needs time to themselves. It may sometimes mean that you find your heart wrung with pain as you listen to the hurts of a heart that need to be told to someone: or it may mean laughing till the tears come over shared joys and jokes. It may - almost certainly it will - mean giving someone second and third and fourth and fifth chances, up to seventy time seven and beyond, while the world - or worse, your family and friends - deride you for a fool. It may mean marrying a prostitute, or caring for someone with AIDS, or helping a not-necessarily-grateful homeless person back into society.

There are so many ways we can find ourselves called to mirror God's love in the relationships we commit ourselves to with friend or neighbour. It's not easy, but it is rewarding. As you go through life this week, look out for opportunities to be Hosea, and show God's love.