**16th September 2018**

**Hosea 11**

*The course of true love never did run smooth*.  So, wrote William Shakespeare in the play A Midsummer Night's Dream, by. True love always encounters difficulties.

Unrequited love is one of life’s frustrating experiences. You fall in love with someone and it’s not reciprocated. They don’t love you back!

I’ve experienced this a few times in my younger life. The girl who I tried my best to always be where she was and get myself noticed by her. And then one day she turned up with her boyfriend. Time to exit stage left.

Or the girl who I got on well with and had a good laugh with but who on being asked whether this relationship could become more serious bluntly said ‘You’re a good friend but I could never imagine you as my boyfriend’ – don’t sugar coat that please – just tell me straight!

Or the girl who did go out with me but who whilst on holiday found someone else and dumped me. All these are painful and life shaping experiences.

With hindsight they are not on the same scale of emotional pain as bereavement or major illness, divorce, separation, disability, unemployment. But at the time you feel rejected, unloved and unlovable, that your world is coming to an end and you hide in your bedroom with the curtains drawn searching a radio channel that is playing a song that fits your depressed mood.

The book of Hosea has the prophet describing the relationship between God and his people the Israelites, like a love relationship where one side has done all the loving and the other side has not reciprocated, and even has been unfaithful and gone off with other lovers. Most of the book is God’s long painful outburst of anger and feeling of rejection by his people.

In chapter six we read Hosea announcing the word of the Lord;

**4**‘What can I do with you, Ephraim?
    What can I do with you, Judah?
Your love is like the morning mist,
    like the early dew that disappears.
**5**Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets,
    I killed you with the words of my mouth –
    then my judgments go forth like the sun.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=hosea+6&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-22173a)]
**6**For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
    and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

It sounds like God is lying on a bed with the curtains drawn in a mood, trying to find a song on the radio to match.

Last week we looked at how the prophet Hosea, one of the four great prophets of Israel in the eighth century before Christ was concerned at the faithfulness of the Israelites to their God. He compared the relationship to a marriage. But whereas God is faithful, God marries an unfaithful and morally dodgy bride.

It starts with God telling Hosea to marry an unfaithful promiscuous woman called Gomer. Gomer either is or will be a prostitute and the prostitution metaphor is used as a comparison to how the Israelites instead of remaining faithful to God are prostituting themselves to other gods and in return for some perceived advantage.

It was the case that in 8th century Israel, the Israelites were following other pagan religions, particularly the cult of Baal the fertility god. People prayed to the Baals (which literally meant ‘The Masters’) for a good harvest and for offspring. Part of the ritual of this pagan cult was to have prostitutes available outside the Baal temples and it could be that Gomer was one of them.

Hosea, from his own experience of having married an unfaithful wife, speaks the word of the Lord and accuses the Israelites of prostituting themselves to other idols and gods.

Whereas in most of the other chapters of Hosea God speaks as a betrayed husband, when we get to chapter 11 God speaks as a betrayed mother.

‘When Israel was a child, I loved him,
    and out of Egypt I called my son.
**2**But the more they were called,
    the more they went away from me.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=hosea+11&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-22243a)]
They sacrificed to the Baals
    and they burned incense to images.
**3**It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
    taking them by the arms;
but they did not realise
    it was I who healed them.
**4**I led them with cords of human kindness,
    with ties of love.
To them I was like one who lifts
    a little child to the cheek,
    and I bent down to feed them.

And whereas a husband can’t divorce his wife a mother can’t divorce her children. No matter what they do they remain her children. So, God is torn between throwing the children out of the house and refusing to have anything to do with them and yielding to the instinct to comfort them the way a mother does.

There was an advert on TV once[[1]](#endnote-1) in which a teenager sits in a laundry and watches as another young man bursts in threatening the people there.  His face is gaunt and scarred from drug use.  He steals their money and then approaches the teenager in the corner.  As the teenager looks up and sees his own face, the thief yells, "This was not supposed to be your life!"  It is meant to be a warning to young people not to try drugs, but it pulls at the hearts of parents who fear for the safety of their children in a world filled with dangerous possibilities that promise excitement but hide the cost and toll they will take.

Hosea speaks the words of a broken-hearted God who experiences the feelings of a parent, "When Israel was a child I loved him.".  This is a passage written by a Parent for parents.

I remember when I was a student minster in Moss Side Manchester and there was a shooting in a gang dispute and someone was killed. The culprit was found. His mother attended the Catholic church I was on placement with. She was ashamed of her son but never disowned him. She stood by his side through the trial and wept and prayed for him.

These are the words of a Parent looking back at the pictures of that innocent child as the young adult goes off on their own, full of independent ambition and pride and unaware of the pitfalls that lie ahead.  In the words of Hosea, we hear this Parenting God who watches as the people of Israel become more and more distant.

"‘Will they not return to Egypt
    and will not Assyria rule over them
    because they refuse to repent?
**6**A sword will flash in their cities;
    it will devour their false prophets
    and put an end to their plans.
**7**My people are determined to turn from me.
    Even though they call me God Most High."

These aren't words of punishment; rather, they are the recognition of the consequences that follow the choices of a headstrong and wayward people.

This Parent also knows the anger that mingles with anguish and sorrow.  The sense of betrayal is real and deep.  In a world based on justice, the child deserves the retribution that is meted on others.  In a world based on fairness, there is no obligation to forgiveness or restoration, and when anger flares we know our child deserves what he gets, whatever the law allows.  "Don't come running back to us, we warned you, we gave you all the chances in the world and you threw it back in our faces.  Now you can live with the consequences.  You made your bed.  Now lie in it!"  How many harsh things have parents thought to say and sometimes said in the heat of the moment in righteous indignation.

But in Hosea, we see the mood change.  The next phrases should be some of the most comforting words in all of scripture, for they speak to us of the meaning of holiness.

It is the human instinct to act in wrath when we have been deceived, let down or betrayed. People often make God in their image and assume God is the same. Hosea goes on:

‘How can I give you up, Ephraim?
    How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?
    How can I make you like Zeboyim?
My heart is changed within me;
    all my compassion is aroused.
**9**I will not carry out my fierce anger,

   nor will I devastate Ephraim again.
For I am God, and not a man –
    the Holy One among you.
    I will not come against their cities.

Being the Hoy One people often assume that God will act in wrath as any human would, but Hosea turns such logic on its head. The holiness of God lies in his refraining from wrath against our faithlessness. God’s heart is changed, all God’s compassion is aroused not God’s anger.

As the anger subsides and the love is rekindled, God will find a way for grace to prevail.  God is sovereign in that God is not trapped by a set of laws.  In the wisdom of God, grace and justice are intertwined.  Justice has an openness to the need for mercy and grace has as its goal justice for all.

This Parent will not leave the children in the hands of the drug dealers.  This Parent is going in to whatever underworld the wayward child is lost within, and they're coming out together.  Hosea continues,

They will follow the Lord;
    he will roar like a lion.
When he roars,
    his children will come trembling from the west.
**11**They will come from Egypt,
    trembling like sparrows,
    from Assyria, fluttering like doves.
I will settle them in their homes,’
    declares the Lord."

Hosea flips metaphors like playing cards to communicate the emotion God experiences and the lengths God will go to maintain this relationship.

Now God is not just a parent but a roaring lion protecting its cubs.  The children react like trembling doves rushing home to find shelter under the mother's wings.  God is a parent, a lion, a mother hen.  We will see these images again, as Jesus tries to describe the One who sends him to live and die for all the lost sheep and wayward children.  God is longsuffering, ferocious and tender.  Whatever it takes to save us from ourselves and the scams that would trick us into believing that there's an easier way, brighter lights, greener grass, a lottery ticket to fame and fortune.  The gods of our age may take different forms, but like Egypt and Assyria they draw us away from the love that gives us life and nurtures us into our truest selves.

God wants us to come home, to be at home with ourselves and with one another.  Wrath and revenge are never God's ultimate goal; and if that is true, they can never be ours.  We may rage in anger at betrayal, but beneath the anger is loss and the deep desire to be made whole and for relationships to be restored. We long to return to a home and community that loves each one into living the life we were meant to live.  And that is also the longing at the heart of God.

In the next chapters you continue to get some of that anger: very much like your 18-year-old son who said he would be home by 11pm and who turns up at 3am in the morning. [[2]](#endnote-2)One parent says, ‘where have you been’. The other says ‘I’m so glad your home. The first may be a father’s anger and questioning, the second may be a mother’s relief -although one shouldn’t stereotype.

Parents can often fear that their children are hell bent on destruction. It’s God’s fear too. In Hosea’s day Judah didn’t turn to Baal worship as Israel did, but it did turn to other countries for political and military help. They didn’t have the patience nor trust to wait for God. We can disown God. We can desert God. We can distrust God.

In our disappointment, deceit and desertion from God be assured that the Lord will say ‘where have you been’ but the last word will be ‘I’m so glad your home’.

1. Rev Mimi Walker <http://day1.org/2108-broken_hearted_god> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Goldingay, *Daniel and the Twelve Prophets for Everyone*, SPCK, 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)