

9th September 2018

Hosea 1 and 2

September always sees the TV companies line up their best programmes in an attempt to catch the viewer. The summer is over, the nights are drawing in, those at work are putting their shoulder to the wheel and come home exhausted and just want to flop in front of the TV. Sunday night was a face-off between Body guard and Vanity Fair. Much media comment was made about Richard Madden's bottom replacing Aidan Turner's bare chest from Poldark. Sex is always a reliable ingredient to get the ratings up.

Over the next two weeks we are looking at the prophet Hosea. And it's all about sex: promiscuity, adultery, prostitution, love, infidelity and gracious faithfulness.

It's about a man and a woman: Hosea and Gomer, the prophet and the prostitute, the nice and the naked, the sacred and the secular.¹

First, I would like to give you background information about the prophet, Hosea. Hosea was one of the four great prophets of Israel in the eighth century before Christ: Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Amos, and these all became famous prophets of the Lord.

Hosea 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.

There are course parallels in the New Testament imagery of the relationship between Jesus and us, the church, with Christ being the perfect groom and the Church as being the imperfect bride. Christ, the perfect groom, looks lovingly on the Church, the people of God, who are corrupted and corroded and covered with sin. This parable is a parable about grace; that God loves sinful, imperfect people. And that is what grace is all about. And that is what the book of Hosea is all about.

It starts with God telling Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman.

Whether God felt Hosea was getting all a bit too self-righteous condemning the Israelites for their sexual activity and comparing this metaphorically with being unfaithful towards their God, who knows? In the way of Jesus, who told us not to judge lest we be judged – perhaps the Lord wanted Hosea to first experience what it is like to be married to an unfaithful partner – so he can gain some personal insight in to the roller coaster of emotions you go through in this situation.

We will never know, but for some reason God commanded Hosea to marry a woman who was, our version describes her, ‘promiscuous’. Older versions called her a whore. There you go – you had dogs last week – whores this week! Who says the Bible is boring?

‘Promiscuity’ is a word that has gone out of favour these days. All sexual activity seems to be acceptable in our casual easy-going society so long as it’s consensual. Promiscuous is a loaded word used, so some say, for the morally uptight prudish lot. The core belief of the new era seems to be that monogamy is dead. Human beings are sexual beings first and foremost. Commitment is dull, a passion killer. These are commonly held views that influence many people and their behavior and their excuses. It is vital that we have the conversation about ‘it’ – the British word for sex – with ourselves and our children because otherwise they will be getting their values from non-Christian sources.

I was reading an article this week by Olivia Faneⁱⁱ who in her first marriage married a man with a Bohemian lifestyle who wanted to divorce sex from love and live in an open marriage where they could each have different sexual partners. The marriage, surprise surprise, didn’t last. Her next husband insisted on monogamy and told her he would be faithful until the end. She writes: *‘he didn’t persuade*

me that sex was profound, loving or important and I was relieved by that. He just said simply that outside a long-term commitment to another person sex was tawdry and self-indulgent. It might be a thrill, but it was also a big ‘so what’.

Olivia Dane concluded her article by saying *‘I loathe those books that berate the fact that the testosterone level goes down in a happily married man, but what freedom it is not to have to think about sex all day! You’re free to love - really to love – your children, your friends and the world you inhabit. And above all monogamy allows you to love the person you happen to be married to – not because they are lean, rich, tanned and the rest of it, not because of earth shattering sex, but because you take off their specs when they’ve fallen asleep, and put the book they’ve been reading back down on the bedside table, making this other world that’s been absorbing them momentarily yours. That is true intimacy.’*

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Some translations translate this word ‘promiscuous’ as ‘prostitute’ and some scholars have speculated that Gomer was a temple prostitute although the Hebrew word isn’t as specific as that. Certainly, later in the book of Hosea we find that Gomer has turned to prostitution or is now

revealed as 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 in order to practice a bit of fertility – if you know what I mean: nudge nudge wink wink say no more.

Even in Jesus’ and Paul’s time pagan temples often had prostitutes available, male and female – which is why many scholars believe Paul condemns homosexuality activity because he sees this activity linked to ungodly worship.

If Gomer was a prostitute it puts a different judgement on her than being promiscuous. Being promiscuous suggests you are willfully unfaithful. Being a prostitute, then as now, may suggest you were selling your body for other motives, mainly to do with survival.

We find prostitutes all over the world, and most of them began young and most of them sell their bodies for money,

not for sex. I read a story from India. India now has a rate of HIV that is beginning to accelerate, much like Africa’s. Some families are very poor. The daughters could not receive an inheritance, the daughters were not married, and eventually the daughters grew up and went to market for the day, and at night they came back with food. How had they gotten their food? Nobody talked about it, but they had sold their bodies, and the HIV virus was spreading. Whether it is the prostitution of India or Thailand or Burma, the tragic story is often the same: a girl has been sold young by her father, and she is now in business for food.

Maybe Gomer was similar to these tragic people around the globe today. Simply, Gomer was a temple prostitute. She sold her body for sex. ... Hosea was ordered by God to marry her and so she married Hosea. She soon deserted her husband and had two illegitimate children.

You can feel the anger expressed here by these acts of adultery and the consequences of adulterous relationships. Affairs wreck marriages. It never ends well, and innocent children are often the victims. Guard your eyes and guard your heart is the scripture advice (e.g. Matthew 5.27-28; 1 Thess 3.4-5; Proverbs 5.3-22; 6.20-35; 1 Cor 6.18). I had a good friend who wanted me to be his accountable friend. Whenever I met up with him I had to ask him to his face:

have you remained faithful to your wife. He gave me permission to punch him in the face if he hadn't. Fortunately, I've never needed to.

Gomer's first child was with Hosea. He was named Jezreel. The two children she had with other men were named Lo-Ruhamah – which means 'not loved' and Lo-Ammi – which means 'not my people'. What does that naming do to these children as they grow up? It's bad enough the names parents give to their children and the embarrassment they have to live with for the rest of their lives.

For example:

Robyn Banks

Dwain Pipe

Hazel Nutt

Annette Kirton

Dan Druff

Chris Cross

Jo King

Doug Graves

Tim Burrrrr!

Yet we shouldn't misunderstand the way names in the Bible work. Many people are given odd names that don't look like the names people would use every day and would thus make the children the object of laughter at school. Maybe they were just used in some way at the child's naming ceremony.

But even so, what we say to our children can damage them and their self-esteem. Calling them useless, a nuisance, always telling them off – will scar them.

Steve Chalkeⁱⁱⁱ recalls a story of how his charity Oasis were working in Zimbabwe. It is part of the culture of some people groups living in Zimbabwe that the father of a new born a baby will name them after the dominant thought that comes into his head after first seeing his child. That's why female names such as Beautiful, Grace, Lovely, Mercy, Pearl, Pretty are extremely popular.

Oasis staff came across one young girl living homeless and alone on the streets. She'd been given the name 'No

Matter’ by her father and had now been abandoned by both of her parents. She came to live with the Oasis team and get a new start. But because she had no birth certificate or official documentation of any sort, it became the responsibility of the oasis staff to register her with the authorities. It was the members of the Oasis gap year team who took her to be registered. And, as they queued in the long line with her – because lines can be very long in Harare the Zimbabwean capital – they slowly formulated a plan. Finally, they reached the head of the queue. They stood in front of the official at the desk. ‘What’s the girl’s name?’ he asked sternly. Together, with one voice, they replied ‘Precious’.

Steve Chalke goes on: much of life turns out to be a quest to find ourselves and discover our place in the world. Each and everyone of us lives in search of a convincing story that explains to us who we are; an overarching narrative that supplies us with a sense of worth and direction; a sense of purpose that wakes us up. ‘Find a purpose: the means will follow’, the saying goes. Or, to put it in the words of Catholic writer Richard Rohr, ‘When you get your, ‘Who am I?’ question right, all of your ‘What should I do?’ questions tend to take care of themselves.’. Without a compelling overarching story – a sense of who we are

and where we fit – we are lost. It’s a bit like being shipwrecked, alone, on a desert island; at best we survive, but we will never thrive.

We could say the same for our Vision 2030 process – Who are we now and therefore what should we do?

‘Hope is a matter of your story, not your mood,’ Chalke continues.

Some of us choose to fill the void left by the absence of such a hopeful story with the pursuit of money, or sex, or power – or perhaps all three. Our hope is that they will bring meaning. But in truth – even for the few who obtain what they crave – these pursuits turn out to offer little more than a momentary distraction from life’s real quest for the deeper treasures of security, love and a sense of significance. What becomes apparent is that it is far too easy to temporarily, and sometimes tragically, mistake money for security, sex for love and power for significance. And of course, that is why an indulgence is never satisfying – because we can never get enough of what we didn’t want in the first place.

For Steve Chalke the hopeful story is found in the Christian gospel – that says our ultimate significance

comes from being made in God's image and loved by God. Whereas the story we get from the world is one of meaninglessness and competition and trying to gain acceptance and status the gospel says God is faithful and doesn't give up on us.

I hope you will take advantage of the opportunity of the Alpha Course to either refresh your own understanding of the Christian story and or encourage some one you know you enquire about and how the Christian story can bring purpose and hope to their lives.

This is the message of Hosea:

According to chapter three: Gomer was finally to be sold into slavery at a slave auction. The day of the auction finally arrived, and the people were watching, sadistically enjoying her misery as she was dragged to the auction floor. The auctioneer cried out, "Who will bid on this woman? Who will buy her as a slave?" There was silence, and then from the silence, we see one hand raise up and one voice said, "I will buy her. I will buy her *back*." It was Hosea, the prophet, and he was buying her back. "What a cad. What a creep. Doesn't he know what he is getting." Hosea was responding to the Word of the Lord who said, "Go again Hosea. Buy that woman who is an adulteress."

And thus, we hear the story of the prophet and the prostitute, the nice and the naked, the respected and the repugnant. We hear the story of the word, redeem. The word, redeem, is an economic word meaning to "buy back again." Hosea bought back Gomer, a sinner; he paid a price for her. And in the New Testament, we hear the story that Christ was a redeemer; that Christ paid the price for us, the sinful people of God. The parallels are perfect. Hosea buys back, Gomer, the sinner; Christ buys back you and me, the sinners. These are stories of pure grace, of pure love, of pure sacrifice for sinful people.

And what is the meaning of this story? Of this parable? The Church is filled with people whose lives are messed up, who don't have it together, who make enormously poor choices and live with their nasty consequences. We are far from faithful to our lord. The lord is not the one we always turn to, always trust, always comes first. The church is filled with flawed sinful people. But Jesus once said, "I didn't come to save the well, but those who know they are sick." And we know that we are not right inside. We are not right with God and God's people around the globe or around our neighborhood. And Christ chooses us, of all people, to be his bride.

Hosea is the Christ figure. Coming to that auction block and all the tongues wagging their sneering criticism that

Gomer was getting what she deserved. And in the silence, Hosea raises his hand and buys Gomer back again. What a fool. What pure grace. What a gift and sacrifice of love.

Hosea? He is symbolic of people who have the courage to care for another, when that courage to care doesn't seem sensible. He had that courage to care for another person, when everybody else had given up on that person. And he was willing to pay the price for that person, when everyone body else said it was a waste of time, effort and money.

It takes courage to care in certain life situations with certain people who may have Alzheimer's disease or a long-term illness or disability. There are all kinds of people that I know who have a courage inside of them, a courage of caring and compassion. And it takes courage to live in those situations, with those kinds of disabilities or

long-term illnesses. It takes an inordinate amount of personal sacrifice.

It takes courage to care for another person when everyone else has given up on them, but you don't. Some may give up on a son or a daughter, a husband or a wife, a brother or a sister. But your compassion is consistent for them, when you know that others have given up. This is especially true for families.

Hosea and Gomer. The prophet and the prostitute. The courage to care. May God inspire you by His faithfulness to us that we may have the grace to love in that way to and thereby reflect more truly the image of God.

To be continued next week.

ⁱEdward F. Markquart
http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_the_prophet_and_the_prostitute.htm

ⁱⁱ Olivia Fane, Monogamy or an open Marriage? My verdict having tried both, The Times, Sept 3rd 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Steve Chalke, Being Human, Hodder, 2015, ch 3.