

The Great Love of God. Pentecost 10 - 1st August 2010

Readings:

Hosea 1: 1-11

Let me start this morning by asking a question. What is the highlight of a church service for you? And there will be no brownie points for the one who says the final benediction. So tell me what is your highlight and why?....

For me as many of you know, it the declaration of forgiveness - the time when our relationship with God's grace is clearest to see. We are loved and we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. And we usually follow it up with a rousing doxology! "Behold behold!" or "Jubilate" or "Alle alle luia!!" And sometimes we sing it with gusto and at other time I wonder if we even feel loved let alone forgiven. And that's OK - sometimes we are not feeling loved and often it is we ourselves that we cannot forgive. At those times we listen to those voices past and present, that tell us we are unloved and unworthy, and those voices drown out God's truth declared here every Sunday morning: We are loved and we are forgiven!

But let me share with two stories that will reinforce God's message to us. The first is one I found in Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, "How good do we have to be?" pp44-46 and the second a piece of beautiful poetry from the book of Hosea.

But first, Rabbi Kushner's story.....

"Several years ago, I was invited to speak at John Hopkins Medical Centre in Baltimore, Maryland. I was asked to talk to the professional staff – doctors, nurses, chaplains, social workers – at noon, and then deliver a public lecture in the evening. After my noon talk to the staff, the chief of chaplaincy services came up to and said, "Rabbi Kushner, we have a patient here at the hospital who would love to meet you. He heard you were going to be here, he has read all of your books and benefited from them, and he just wanted the chance to talk to you.

Let me be clear about this. You're certainly under no obligation to see him. If you'd rather not, I'll tell him that you were tired and had a very full schedule. He is a thirty-two-year-old Episcopal minister, and he's dying of AIDS." I indicated that I would be willing to see him.

The chaplain led me down a corridor and into a room where I saw a pale, emaciated figure lying in a bed and hooked up to several intravenous tubes. I introduced myself and asked him how he was doing. "Not too good," he told me, "but I'm getting used to it." I asked him, "Do you ever worry that you might be dying without God? That your disease might in some way be a punishment from God for something you did?" He looked up at me and said, "No, just the opposite. The only good thing that has come out of this is that I found out that something I always wanted to believe is really true. No matter how much I may have messed up my life, God hasn't given up on me. I've felt His presence here in this hospital room. He can love me even when I find it hard to love myself."

He paused to gather his strength before continuing. "When I was young, I thought I had to be perfect for people to love me. My parents gave me that message, threatening to withhold love every time I offended them. My teachers at school gave me that message.

My Sunday School teachers reinforced that lesson. We didn't go to one of those hellfire-and-brimstone churches, but we heard a lot about how much pain we were causing God every time we sinned, and I think that was just as bad, especially given the list of things we were told were sins.

"I tried so hard to be perfect so that my parents, my teachers, and God would love me. I probably went into the ministry in part so that people would think that I was morally perfect and love me for it.

But every time I did something that I knew was wrong, and every time I told a lie to cover up for myself, I would hate myself for being such a phony, and I was sure that God was as contemptuous of me as I was of myself.

But lying here in this hospital bed, knowing I'm going to die soon, I had this insight: God knows what I'm like and He doesn't hate me, so I don't have to hate myself. God knows what I've done and He loves me anyway. I'll be leaving the hospital soon, not because I'm getting better soon but because there's nothing more they can do for me and they need the bed for somebody they can help. I don't know if my congregation will take me back, now that they know I'm gay and have AIDS and I'm dying. I hope they will, because there is one last sermon I want to preach to them. I have to share with them the lesson my illness has taught me: You don't have to be perfect. Just do your best, and God will accept you as you are. Don't expect your children to be perfect. Love them for their faults, for their trying and stumbling even as our Father in Heaven loves us."

But our episcopalian minister friend is only one of a long line of people who in the face of adversity and inadequacy feel the wonderful healing power of God's love and grace. Take Hosea, another of a long line of imperfect servants called to serve the God of Israel, our God. A line that stretches from Abraham to David and beyond.

And Hosea, well he's a bit of a joke isn't he? Go home and read all about him in the first three chapters of the Book of Hosea. He chooses to marry one of those terrible women who are involved in the Canaanite fertility cults. It's no surprise that she leaves him. And Hosea, well he says God told him to marry her!!

And then there is the names he gives the poor kids. The oldest boy is called Jezreel - it means "God scatters" for goodness sake. Then there is the girl he names "Lo Ru Hammah" - "Not loved!", and finally another daughter that he names "Lo Ammi!" - "Not my people." What sort of father would call his kids those names? Imagine the flak they copped when they went to school because of their names. A dysfunctional family if ever there was one.

But as I have said many times before, it is often the most unlikely of people that God calls to be served by. Look at the ones Jesus called to be his disciples.

So it is with Hosea, who is called to prophesy during a period of social, political and religious upheaval that plagued the Northern kingdom of Israel during the 740's BCE.

And so God uses Hosea's personal life to show his people just how far they have strayed. Through Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful wife, God shows them the pain God endures in having an unfaithful people. A people that goes a-whoring after the Baals of Israel. And through the names of Hosea's children, God warns the people of Israel, firstly that he will scatter them, Jezreel; then as God's anger grows, he says he will no longer love them -Lo Ru Hammah; and then finally in exasperation God says that he will no longer be there for them-Lo Ammi. The covenant will be broken. In verse nine of chapter one - 'You will no longer be

my people and I will no longer be there for you.” The direct antithesis of the covenant made to Moses in Exodus.

But fortunately the story continues and in chapter 11, God, through his prophet Hosea, shows his people just how far they have forgotten their birth story of how God had led them through the birth waters, out of bondage in Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey. But Israel’s memory lapse has landed her back in bondage. So God has his prophet, Hosea narrate a sequence of images in a bid to jog her memory about the birth of a nation. Listen to this moving paraphrase of the Hosea passage from Elizabeth Myer Boulton.

“I remember the day you were born. The groaning and the aching and the crying out. I remember the Red Sea waters breaking; I remember the pangs of labour, as if the whole world was going to rip apart, but then I caught you in my arms and fell madly in love with you. I taught you how to walk. I picked you up when you fell, pressed your cheek against mine. When you cried I let down food for you. Like a mother bird I fed you; like a good physician, I healed you. Don’t you remember?”

After 10 whole chapters of accusation and judgement God finally arrives at these beautiful and tender words - words of just how much God loves her people. Here we have an image of a mother God who will never let her children go, no matter what we do. A mother God that leaves her children with the hope of new beginnings. We are loved, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!

And that is the message of Jesus the Christ. We, like our Israelite predecessors, are a frail people. We easily falter. We make mistakes. We wilfully chose dead ends in our lives. BUT throughout our lives, as it is throughout the Bible narrative, God steps in to save his people. So listen to these words from the prophet Hosea from the end of chapter 11:

***God says: “How can I give you up? How can I abandon you?
My heart will not let me do it. My love for you is too strong.
For I am God and no mortal. I, the Holy One, am with you.***

And so I declare to you now: We are loved and we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*Rev Tony Duncan
1st August 2010
pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au*