Sermon 24 July 2022

Rev Canon Peter Parker

Sermon begins at 34:40

I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer and sustainer, Amen.

Well, I chose to spare you the Old Testament reading from Hosea today, because it contains some definitely “adult” material. Hosea is told in fact to marry a prostitute and have children with her. This passage is part of the prophet's exploration of why Yahweh has apparently abandoned the people of Israel. His overall message sounds like the problem is something called idolatry; not just a matter of worshipping idols, it has to do with rampant injustice and corruption and the oppression of the poor.

So there are three children supposedly born to this liaison that Hosea has, and in the names Hosea is told to give them are the tough messages of the day: the first child was called Jezreel, which meant in Hebrew, “the bow of Israel will be broken”, their military prowess would be gone. The second was called Lo-Ruhamah, which means “no mercy”: Israel will no longer receive the mercy of God. The third was called Lo-Ammi, which means “orphaned” or “without parents”: Israel will no longer be God's people, and God will no longer be their God. So to the ears of the people of Hosea's day, there really could be no more shocking and horrible outcome. They're being thrown out of the cherished covenant relationship which they'd heard over and over again in the words “I will be your God and you shall be my people”.

Can you imagine your parents saying to you, “You're no longer my child”? If you're a parent, can you imagine saying that to any of your children? Sadly, it does actually happen, but Hosea puts that line into Yahweh's mouth. Hosea's supposed children, really the offspring of the prophetic message, give voice to this disastrous fracturing of the relationship between God and Israel. Idolatry, placing our own egos and needs and lusts, our own little false gods, before our faithful following of God, breaks that relationship. It did then, and it still has the same consequences today. Now we don't know whether it was Hosea trying to soften the blow or some other later editor who felt it just had to be added, but after these awful declarations, in the same passage we read, “Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the seam which can be neither measured nor numbered, and in the place where it was said to them ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’”

Even when it has gotten as bad as it can get, in the divine ways of handling things there is always a triumph of love, reconciliation, and restoration. Even when we have forsaken God's ways, even when we've earned that complete fracturing of the relationship, God is looking on in divine anguish and saying, “You are the beloved children of the living God.” And we must be very careful not to infer that it's okay to be unfaithful to God, because no matter what, God will take us back: like any heresy, that's only half a truth. Certainly our God is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy, but Hosea's story compels us to focus particularly on the capacity of our sin and faithlessness to cause pain to God, to cut us off from the love of God. We're called into such an intimate relationship with God that when we break it, there is enormous pain on the divine side as well as on ours.

And so we heard Paul say, “As you, therefore, have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith. And he adds, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe.” We are in this deep and intimate relationship in our spiritual life, a relationship something akin to, but infinitely deeper and more precious than, the loving relationship between a parent and a child; something akin to, but infinitely more precious than, the relationship of spouse with loving spouse. This relationship with God is vulnerable to our freedom: our freedom to turn our backs on Christ, our freedom to choose ways and values and behaviours and beliefs that run counter to the mercy and compassion and justice making and the unconditional love which formed Christ's mission.

“See to it that no one takes you captive,” said Paul. What does it mean to be captivated? Being captivated is the very thing that happens, for example, in an affair, or in an addiction, whether to substances or to a harmful lifestyle. Being captivated happens in a fascination with false spirituality or bad religion; Christians of various stripes, in fact, practitioners of just about any religion have been known to become captivated by their own cherished traditions and ideas, and sometimes to their personal emotional religious experiences. That was the great risk of the charismatic renewal movement, being captivated by personal emotional religious experiences.

So Paul says, “Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths.” Of course we have emotional experiences around our faith, but these are just little windows to glimpse the glory of God. They aren't meant to captivate us in a way that draws us aside or divides us from others. Some religious leaders have so much personal appeal that their followers become captivated to their personality cult; think of leaders like Jim Jones who convinced his followers to commit suicide. We think of Robert Schuller whose congregation at the Crystal Cathedral failed to outlive his personality. Never let anyone take you captive away from the gospel that we have from this Jesus that we know. Paul put it this way, ”Hold fast to the head from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with the growth that is from God.”

Jesus encourages his followers to trust their relationship with God as with an infinitely perfect parent, and here we have some humour in the Gospel of Luke: “Is there anyone among you, if your child asked for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? or if a child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” There's a piece of advice in there about what's really important: if you want to be asking God for something that will truly be a good thing in our lives, he suggests we should be asking for the Holy Spirit; in other words, asking for the presence of the living God in our lives, asking for the presence of the Prince of Peace, the crucified and risen Lord. For when we ask for the Holy Spirit, we are asking for nothing less: this is the One who promised he would be with us always, to the end of time; the one who is the image of the unseen God. This is the one, as Paul wrote, “in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

In this time of transition here at St Philip church, this congregation is presented with an ideal opportunity to check itself, to review the reality in which you find yourself, to assess the undeniable effects of living and worshiping and working with one beloved pastor for decades. Christopher Page is a remarkable priest of our church, no question. I've known him since before he was ordained, and I've watched him, read him, and admired him. I would not for a minute suggest that he tried to establish any personality cult here! but the truth of all pastorates, especially long ones, is that the longer the pastorate, the deeper the imprint we all bear. All clergy have, if you like, a footprint. I've been told about mine, specifically. Now in this time, you have the chance to dissect that footprint, to see how it has benefited or limited your ministry, your worship life, your connectedness to the wider church and the wider world. What captivates us? You are the children of God. Jesus Christ is the true head of this church. No better words could be uttered to you in this transition than Paul's: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith.” Amen.