



Scenes from the Old Testament

Gomer and Hosea

21 February 2016
Bishop of Colchester

Hosea 1: 1-10 Luke 13: 31-end

Cody F. Miller, *Gomer & Hosea*¹

It is good to be back here.

I have fond memories of sitting in a room not too far from this chapel eating my sandwiches as the Reverend John Westerdale Bowker, once Dean of Trinity, led us in a discussion of such matters as 'can anything be inextricably linked to anything else?'. His penetrating insights were always balanced by his assertion that what people say about God is bound to be approximate, provisional, corrigible and often wrong... but, he said, this does not mean that God is not there to be talked about.

Tonight, I want to talk about God and, to some extent, about the inextricable link – the bond of love – between God and us. When Michael invited me to preach in this series on Scenes from the Old Testament, he suggested that subjects might include the expulsion from Eden, Noah and the Flood, the sacrifice of Isaac, Samson, Job, Moses giving the Law, or Daniel in the Lion's Den. It was slightly surprising not to see mention of chariots of fire, but otherwise it is a compelling, dramatic and visually arresting list of extraordinary events. But he did also say that I may wish to suggest another scene and that is what I have done.

The picture that you have before you is *Gomer & Hosea* by the American artist Cody Miller, who is in his mid-forties, lives in Ohio and works at The Goodwill Art Studio and Gallery which runs a fine arts program for people with developmental disabilities and other barriers. Why Cody Miller? Because he gets it. He gets what this is all about; he sees into the heart of God, and that is what the book of Hosea is all about. It is about seeing, feeling and understanding what it is that makes God tick. Hosea – maybe more than anyone else – understood the nature of God's love.

So the Book of Hosea begins by placing the events in the context of some political instability in the area around northern Iraq, southeast Turkey, Iran and Syria. Some things, it seems, never change. But then – in verse two – we have one of those bits in the Bible that cause us to sit up and take notice.

¹ <http://www.codymiller.com/paintings/gomer-and-hosea/>

God spoke to Hosea and said, “Go, and marry a prostitute.” So Hosea, being a faithful and obedient man, did as he was told. The wonderful preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes the scene:

He went down to the local brothel and asked to meet some of the women who worked there, sitting on the red crushed velvet sofa with hands between his knees while he waited for them to come down. The madam was glad to oblige him, thinking she was about to get herself a new customer, but when Hosea proposed to Gomer right there in the perfumed parlour and Gomer said yes, the madam threw them both out onto the street – the sober-looking fellow in the dark suit and the mincing woman with the big hair, who squinted up at the sun as if she had not been outdoors in years.²

To be fair, this was an odd marriage: Hosea and Gomer were an unlikely couple and things didn't get any more conventional when they had children. The first child was called Jezreel, which isn't too bad; the name means 'God sows', which could speak of new life and growth. But Jezreel is also the name of the city where in 841 BC Jehu – the current King Jereboam's forefather – murdered an entire royal family. And the Valley of Jezreel was the site of many famous battles. Calling your son Jezreel would be like calling him Auschwitz or Hiroshima or Waterloo; it spoke of destruction, devastation and death.

Next, they had a daughter and named her Lo-ruhamah, which means 'no compassion' or 'not pitied' and comes from the Hebrew word for a mother's womb and therefore of a mother's tender, compassionate love. But Lo-ruhamah means no compassion or not pitied; she is without that tender, compassionate love. Then they have a son called Lo-ammi, which means – quite devastatingly – 'not my people'.

So the fruit of this dysfunctional marriage is destruction, despisement and being disowned.

Now Hosea did not marry Gomer because he wanted to make an example of her before the people of Israel. It is not like when Jeremiah smashed a jug in front of the people and said that is what God is going to do with you. No; Hosea didn't marry Gomer as some kind of acted-out parable. He married Gomer because he loved her. But Gomer did not know how to be faithful. At the beginning of Chapter 3 we learn that Gomer had run away and sold herself as a slave. It is the age old story of the Prodigal Son turning their back on what they have, thinking 'I'm sure I can do better than this' but ending up realising that the grass on the other side is never as green as it looks, ending up beaten, broken and lost.

God, in his love for us, the agonised love of the father in the story of the prodigal son, and poor Hosea have this one thing in common. They know what it is to love one who does not know how to be faithful. Again, Barbara Brown Taylor describes how it is for God, drawing parallels with Gomer and Hosea:

... she would come into the room and lean against the door jamb looking at him, a cut on her upper lip and the fading bruise of someone's strong grip on her arm, home to the husband who took her by the hand and drew her bath and tugged her torn clothes over her head while she held her skinny arms up for him like a child.³

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 55.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 57.

Hosea goes in search of Gomer and buys her back for fifteen shekels of silver, a homer of barley and a measure of wine. He redeems her. And this is the scene that Cody Miller has drawn. He describes it like this:

They've been home for a couple hours and Gomer sits there not knowing what to say or do. He pauses from his work when he hears her say his name, in this rasping broken voice. From the way she says it, it's all he can do to keep from falling to pieces. Then for the first time in what seems like ages, he touches her. He lets her know that he's in this thing for the long haul. At that moment, she knows that in his heart of hearts this old prophet really does love her.

So, ultimately, Hosea is called to speak for God, to utter words of prophecy, to declare his message. But by now Hosea understands. He understands that God loves us not because we have deserved his love and not in spite of our undeserving; He loves us because he has chosen to love us.

What are the options? What else could God do?

I suppose he could destroy us, wipe us off the face of this earth, flood the earth and start again, or – like Sodom and Gomorrah – he could raze us to the ground and burn us until no trace is left.

But this is what God says in Hosea Chapter 11: 8:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

In case you're wondering, Admah and Zeboiim were cities destroyed alongside Sodom and Gomorrah. Deuteronomy 29: 23 refers to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord destroyed in his fierce anger.

But there is more, for as Hosea articulates what is going on in the heart of God, he says this: "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." The word we translate as 'recoiled' or 'overturned' is precisely the word used in Genesis 19: 25 when it says that God 'overthrew' those cities. That destruction, that overturning, that overthrowing now goes on in the very heart of God. And when Hosea has God say that his compassion grows warm and tender, there is an echo again of Deuteronomy 29, where Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim have their soil burned out by sulphur and salt because, like a flaming fire, the anger of the Lord was kindled against that land. That word for kindled is the same word that Hosea uses to talk of God's compassion, growing warm – kindling inside him.

You see, Hosea understands how God's redemption works. Hans Wolff, in his beautiful commentary on this passage, says:

The struggle between God's love and his wrath takes place in God himself, in that the destructive "overturning" and "burning" of judgement ... now takes place in God's heart instead of in Israel.⁴

Hosea is just a whisker away from what it says in 1 John 4: God is love, and in this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And what, you may ask, of Gomer and Hosea and of their children?

On that day I will answer, says the Lord,
I will answer the heavens
and they shall answer the earth;
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel;
and I will sow him for myself in the land.
And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah,
and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people';
and he shall say, 'You are my God.'

So Jezreel becomes a symbol not of destruction but of God's gracious provision of all that God in his love gives us. And Lo-ruhamah, the one without pity, is now shown compassion as she is loved with that tender love that a mother shows her children. And Lo-ammi – 'not my people' – is told 'You are my people' as God runs towards him holding wide his arms ready to embrace. You are my people. You are my son, my daughter, and I love you.

Cody Miller, who somehow sums all that up in this picture, said this in an email to me: 'I believe the story of Hosea and Gomer is a profound illustration that God will never stop pursuing us: however deep the pit, however dark the shadows, He's seen it all.'

He is the 'Hound of Heaven', as Francis Thompson wrote. I am a half-hearted man, he says, full of contradictions and yet God wants to make a home in me and I to make a home in Him. It just doesn't add up, he said; I'm completely dumbstruck.

I think it is the hardest thing for the church to come to God and each other in all our brokenness. It's so messy, inconvenient and uncomfortable to come to each other like this, but as the story shows, this is where the real healing begins.

So let us pray.

Holy God, our lives are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son bring us healing
and make us whole in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

⁴ Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, Vol. 28 of *Hermeneia – A critical and historical commentary on the Bible* (Fortress Press, 1974) p. 204.