

Pentecost 10
5/08/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Hosea 11:1 - 11
Psalm 107
Colossians 3:1 - 11
Luke 12:13 - 21

On being rich towards God

In the last year we have had a series of TV programs: Grumpy Old Men, Grumpy Old Women and Grumpy Old Holidays. Listening to the prophets Amos and Hosea in the past few weeks, we may have felt inspired to suggest a new series called Grumpy old Prophets. They are often characterised as sour preachers who had only bad news to deliver to the people. Hosea preached at a time when Israel had enjoyed fifty years of prosperity. The people were replete and had been seduced by the sensual pleasures of the fertility cults of the region. Then in neighbouring Assyria a new king arose who embarked on military campaigns against Israel. Hosea agonized over the impending fate of his people. He saw what was happening as a movement of God against the people because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant established through Moses.

Hosea was a preacher of rare intensity. He speaks of strong feelings: love, anger, disappointment and ambivalence. At the same time there are not many passages in the Bible, which depict the Israel-God relationship with such tenderness.

When Israel was a child I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms...
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.

I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to feed them. (11:3-4)

But there was another side to the story:

The more I called them
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and offering incense to idols. (11:2)

Tender, parental love contrasts with the pain of a broken relationship. Hosea's pain is the pain of God provoked by present unfaithfulness compared with the days of the Exodus when, in the desert, Israel lived in direct trust of God.

Hosea had characterised Israel's dalliance in fertility cults as an act of religious

adultery: of “playing the harlot” against God. Israel had broken the commandments and polluted its beliefs. Instead of honouring God as the source of its life and gifts produced by the land they had been given, prosperity and peace were ascribed to Baal. They were rich in things, and poor towards God. The Lord says:

She did not know that I gave her
the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and lavished upon her the silver
and gold they used for Baal. (2:8)

This leads us into the deepest part of Hosea’s message. There is a struggle within the heart of God. God is against Israel but God also remembers the original tenderness of the love between them.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
... My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender. (11:8)

There is a struggle between wrath and love, which is resolved in a plan to return Israel to the desert, a metaphor for the place where Israel’s original love will be renewed, and a new betrothal to God will be made. In this case the desert was exile in Babylon, but it would not last forever. In the end, mercy would win over judgement. Judgement falls, but the grace of God is steadfast, because God’s purpose is not to destroy, but to heal. The coming historical crisis will be means of judgement, but it will also bring salvation because it will shake to the core Israel’s tendency to self-sufficiency. By this will Israel be freed from its crippling trust in its own strength, and renewed in its trust in God. Through this will Israel relearn what it means to be rich towards God.

There are links between this and the story about greed in Luke. The man who built bigger barns for himself was graced with amazing prosperity but in his greed did not pause to give thanks to the giver of all good gifts. He did not reflect on the needs of the world, his ethical and moral responsibilities towards his neighbours or the real extent of his own needs. Because he had lost sight of the one thing that truly secured his future, he came to believe his newfound wealth spelt the end of all his worries. His plan to store up treasure for himself was an act of religious adultery in which he ceased to find his treasure in God.

What would it have meant for him to stay rich towards God? It would have meant praising God as the source of all life and gifts, in the midst of his good fortune. It would have meant retaining a sense of gratitude, and allowing himself to be possessed by God, rather than becoming possessed by his possessions. Instead he allowed his prosperity to seduce him into thinking there was no one but himself to care for. He was rich, and there was no crime in that. But in the face of his gifts he became a fool, not because of his prosperity or his capitalism, but because he thought building bigger barns would secure his life. By turning away from a life lived in gratitude to the living God he lost the one real thing he had – his freedom. He became possessed by his possessions, which in the face of his impending death had no power to save.

When Israel was a child, I loved him
and out of Egypt, I called my son.

According to the rabbis, when Israel came out of Egypt it was springtime and the desert received the people like a welcome guest. In the desert Israel's freedom consisted of living with nothing but the grace of God.

Luke refers to the Cross and Resurrection as Jesus' exodus. There are many resonances between the desert and the core celebration of the Christian tradition, the Easter mysteries. In this act the cross becomes the sign of Jesus' choice to rely solely on God. This same cross reveals human judgement on the work of God amongst us. But here judgement and salvation become one. In the mercy of God the cross is transformed into the sign of our salvation, showing the way to perfect riches, born of trust in God.

Colossians reminds us that through our baptism into the Cross of Christ we have actually experienced our own the death and resurrection. We have passed through the waters into new life and are free to live for God, rather than for ourselves.

So if you have been raised with Christ,
seek the things that are above,
where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. (3:1)
Set your minds on things that are above,
not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ.

What does it mean live in richness towards God? For Christians it means always to focus on the things of God, the things that are above, as revealed in Jesus Christ. It means being alert to the ways in which life today threatens to seduce us into securing our life in some place other than this. There is so much about the current climate that undermines faith in God and calls us to live for ourselves alone. But those who have turned their backs on the past by dying with Christ, have their anchor in heaven, not on earth, and do not live by the standards of earthly appeal. Therefore they are able to live for life, and need not be driven by human insecurities, fears of not having enough, or terror of dying. This is the gift of God to us, which brings an end to hopelessness, anger, fear and pessimism.

It is in pursuit of this gift of life that we gather here to praise God. In a context shaped by the Christian symbol system of cross, water, word, table, bread and wine, we open ourselves afresh to receive new life from this source. But being together in worship is not our sole purpose. For the richness received and the freedom kindled here are not for ourselves alone. They are gifts to be expressed in lives that are lived richly towards God in the world. That means that here, every Sunday, a people is created that is empowered to live in the same freedom and generosity that we praise God for in this place. Living in freedom is made possible because, through prayer, word and sacrament the inner darkness that keeps ourselves at the centre has been disturbed, and we have been turned out from ourselves to seek our life in God again. It is not in giving away our possessions that we will be come free. It is in allowing ourselves to be possessed by God, who gives us gifts that last, that we will be liberated to live life in a whole new way. The ability to live generously has its source

in the generosity of God. Praise to God for the gift of life and freedom, which brings us riches that nothing we can have or do can buy.