

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107
Luke 9:51-60

God's happy ending

In a sentence:

Despite what we see, we are part of God's work in God's love

Everybody likes a story with a happy ending, and the preaching of Hosea is something of a happy ending story – at least, ‘on paper’. We have that story summarised for us this morning in chapter 11, in its move from covenant to betrayal to punishment to promised restoration.

The story begins with the touching intimacy God enjoyed with Israel, and they with him:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son...
...I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.*
I bent down to them and fed them. (11.1,4)

From there we hear of the betrayal – Israel's turning away from God – and then of the judgement: the rage of the consuming and devouring sword.

The turning point of the drama is found in God's coming to himself:

^{11.8} How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
...My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
⁹ I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

And finally, there is a promised restoration:

^{11.10} They shall go after the LORD,
who roars like a lion;
when he roars,
his children shall come trembling from the west.
¹¹ They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,
and like doves from the land of Assyria;
and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Here we have our ‘happy ending’.

And yet... *for whom* is it a happy ending? By the time of the promised return, the sword will have done its devastating work. Those who are crushed under the great weight of the Assyrians have no happy ending. And the text does not suggest that only the guilty – or the especially guilty – fall in this way, such that it is the less guilty who benefit from a change in the divine heart.

What, then, is actually promised here; what is the *content* of the happy ending for those who heard of it in advance and did not see it realised? The temptation is strong to ‘spiritualise’ the promise at this point. This we can do with the notion of a time and place *outside* messy history when all things are restored; we’ve come to call this ‘heaven’. Thus, while it might be the case that a few will experience some realisation of God’s promises in *this* world, those who don’t will experience it in the *next*. The idea of heaven is a way in which we can make *personal* the content of such promises as Hosea makes here, if they don’t quite reach us – personally – in time. ‘In the end’ comes to mean *beyond* the end. If I don’t survive the sword, heaven can still make me a beneficiary of the promise.

But this reading of the ending won’t do for Hosea. He sees the love God has for Israel, the judgement which is brought to bear on them, and the promised reconciliation as each being as real as the other. If God ‘really’ loves Israel here and now, and if there is a ‘real’ judgment here and now, then the promised return home is also ‘real’ in the same way.

But home-coming will not be realised for all who hear the promise. God promises to stand Israel back on its feet but it will not be all of old Israel. Again, it is not that the bad Israelites are gone and the good ones remain to start again. The promise is to no individual but to Israel as a whole: Israel as the object *and the sign* of God’s love.

This is to say that the divine promise is not here – and perhaps is not ever – quite about us as individuals: about you and me, here and now, isolated from the whole sweep of God’s life with creation. God is not a ‘solution’ to whatever here-and-now problem *we* have, is not a cure for whatever we think might ail *us*, is not a promise for this or that outcome in *our* lives.

Most of us know this, typically from bitter disappointment. But, just as typically, our disappointment springs from misunderstanding what God brings.

For, in fact, what God brings is ‘Israel’ and not merely any one of us as part of Israel (or of the church). Israel is the concrete and tangible object of God’s love – the subject of the divine covenant and of the prophets’ tirades. But Israel is also the not-yet fulfilled *sign* of that love, and so not quite any particular Israel or Israelite. ‘Israel,’ as the *object* of God’s love is us here and now, sometimes achieving, sometimes failing. Israel as the *sign* of God’s love stands where we *want* to be – this is the promise of coming to God and coming to ourselves which is not yet realised for us, and we look to see realised in others. *Our* healing is in *theirs*, who are yet to come.

This will become important later in our reflection on the Hosea’s call to justice and fairness but, for now, let’s note that it is not different from what we considered last week. There we saw that life comes from ‘overhearing’ an exchange which is not, in the first instance, quite about us. This week we see that, in God’s dealings with Israel – even for those within Israel itself – it is not quite about them, or us.

There is a drama unfolding, at the heart of which is Israel as object and sign of God’s love and commitment. Israel is central to the drama and so the story unfolds out of Israel’s engagement with God. But the principal protagonist is God. What brings God to

the people in reconciliation is God himself. This we see in what we called earlier the ‘turning point’ in the drama unfolded in chapter 11. The saving moment is not the return home at the lion’s roar but when God remembers: when Israel was a child, I lifted him to my cheek.

The promised restoration of the community is a word not only to the community itself but to *God*. The tangible Israel to which Hosea preached is the object of God’s love; future, restored Israel is a sign, pointing to what must not be forgotten – most of all by God. To say that there will be a restoration of Israel is to say more about *God’s* future – that God will continue to be one who lifts a beloved child to cheek – than it is say something about the future of any one of us.

None of this is to say that what actually happens here and now doesn’t matter, or that we as individuals don’t matter to God. The rage of the prophets for justice and fairness in Israel is there precisely *because* the needs of any one of us matters.

But Israel – and, with care, the church with Israel – is part of something bigger than what it seems to be at any point. For the most part we see only ourselves, and promises sound mostly to be about an extension of ourselves. Yet God’s promise springs from coming to himself: ‘How can I give you up...?’ What is promised is the extension of *God*.

This has, perhaps, been a rather challenging reading of what is happening in Hosea’s 11th chapter, and I suspect it still needs to be refined at a couple of places. But the point is perhaps well summarised in this way: the promise which God makes despite the felt presence of the consuming sword of Israel’s enemies is that God’s cause – which is Israel’s very reason for being – is not going to be lost in the disaster falling upon them. The promise is not that anyone of them will survive but that even after all that God will be the same God who began this adventure, doing the same things toward the same end, and that means there will still need to be an Israel to lift to the cheek.

The word of promise then – the thing which believers believe – is that God will triumph over – and for – God’s people.

Our lives are to be oriented toward that promise, that triumph, because the promise is that even we who do not see the promised land ourselves are part of what God is doing.

We do not know what God’s work will finally look like but our lives are a part of it, even now when it is not fulfilled. As we move further into Hosea we will see that this is what drives the call to justice and fairness in Israel.

Until then we turn to God’s turning to himself and hear him declare, ‘How can I give you up? I will not...’
