

Pentecost 8
4/8/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Hosea 4:1-6, 12-14

Psalm 139

Galatians 4:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Known by God

In a sentence:
Knowing God is knowing that God knows us,
and loves us nevertheless

Hosea is not very strong on what some might characterise as the ‘classic’ prophetic theme of social justice. There are a couple of references in his preaching to moral breakdown – we’ve heard some of them today – but the emphasis on the poor, outcast and weak we hear in other prophetic voices is not so clearly to the fore in Hosea.

His interest is more in social failure as a sign of a deeper shortcoming in the life of Israel. What is going wrong in social relations is not merely a number of immoral choices instead of moral ones. As we have now noted a couple of times, sin – good quality sin – is always rational, always defensible, and so always arguably *necessary*. Unless we get to the heart of the problem, sin is just this or that particular thing we might have done wrong.

The deeper failing Hosea identifies is a lack of ‘knowledge’ of God: *‘There is no knowledge of God in the land...my people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge’ (4.1)*. Yet the knowledge which is lacking here is not knowledge ‘about’ God, or even the knowledge that God ‘exists’. The ‘knowledge’ which interests Hosea is that kind of knowing which involves an intimate integration with the thing known.

We get an insight into the extent of this integration in older translations like that of Genesis 4.1 in the King James Version: ‘And Adam *knew* Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain...’ The Old Testament uses widely ‘knowledge’ as what we might be tempted to call a ‘euphemism’ for sexual intercourse; to know someone ‘in the biblical sense’ is to have moved into knowledge of the MA15+ kind.. Yet ‘know’ here is really only a euphemism for sex from our perspective as those who consider knowledge to be principally a ‘head’ thing. What matters scripturally is not the means or subject of the knowing but the intimacy it entails. To know something in the fullest scriptural sense – another person (sexually or not), or one’s craft, or one’s place in the world – is to have an intimate integration with it, to the extent even that we can understand ourselves to be known *by* whatever it is we know. The mutuality of the sexual metaphor is almost indispensable here.¹

To say, then, that there is no knowledge of God in the land is not to say that no one thinks any more about religion – there is plenty of religion going on. It is to say that where there was intimacy with this God there is now not, and that other intimacies are now in place.

¹ Yet it is not that sex tells us about deep knowing; deep knowing tells us about sex.

If we are made for this kind of intimacy with God, then we will naturally seek it: we will seek to know and to be known, to possess and to be possessed. This is not only in human relationships but in the broadest sweep of our being: we are built to seek a sense of ‘belonging’, of being part of a whole, of ‘fitting’ into a bigger picture. We express this in the fact that we attach ourselves to things, whether people, objects, ideas, or gods.

But what is important here is that although we do attach ourselves to such things, they do not *determine* the attachment. We understand *ourselves* to be the bestowers of meaning and value: *this* is life-giving, *that* is not; this is good, that is not good. The modern social media ‘like’ is a stroke of religious genius: in this we are fulfilled as arbiters of good and evil (Genesis 3), even if we might yet change our minds and exercise the power to ‘unlike’. That we might unlike is to indicate that it’s our *choice* of what is good which matters, and not the thing we choose.

In the face of this – several thousand years before ‘like’ symbols appeared web pages – Hosea proposes a different choosing, a different knowing. We have already noted how Hosea takes the sexual metaphor over from the local pagan fertility cults which were so tempting to many in Israel ([sermon, July 21](#)). Yet he presses the metaphor further by portraying God as an active and interested participant in this ‘knowing’ intercourse.

That is, God’s activity and interest is not in *mere* participation as one possible partner among many. *God knows before being known*. In a whole other conversation, St Paul uses exactly the same twist in what we heard from Galatians today. There he makes a self-correction which might almost go unnoticed. Paul recasts salvation not as the obvious *coming to know* God but unexpectedly as coming to be *known by* God.² This is unexpected because piety holds that God knows everything and so has *always* ‘known’ us. To counter this we must then modify Paul slightly: salvation is coming to *know ourselves known* by God.

The failure of Israel – which is the failure of any one of us – is not that the wrong option for god has been chosen among the many options available. This would be a mere moral failure – like sleeping with a person you should not have, or not declaring an income source you should have, or hoarding chocolate. Moral failure matters but it is not at the heart of Hosea’s preaching.

Hosea announces, rather: your true self exists in knowing yourself known. This is what our psalmist today (139) understands.

Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, the beautiful intimacy that psalm is a terrifying prospect:

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me....

³You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

...⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

Such intimate knowledge could only be terrifying in a world in which we cannot help but be broken – and so in which we fall desperately short of the glory of God. Yet Hosea declares more than this. For our true selves exist in knowing ourselves known, and knowing ourselves *nevertheless* still loved.

² ‘Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits...?’ (Galatians 4.9; 1 Corinthians 13.12).

For all the rage in Hosea's preaching, the love and desire remains. The confronting 'whore' chapter we considered last week ends like this:

¹⁴ Therefore, I will now persuade her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵ ...There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

^{2.16}On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, 'My husband', and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal'... ¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day...I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. ²⁰I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

Our Psalmist proposes, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night' (139.11)

But Hosea agrees with the poet's self-reply: 'even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.'

God's knowledge of us is
as light to darkness
and life to the dead.

Let any who find themselves in darkness or death rejoice, then, for God knows you,
and this is light, and life.
