

Pentecost 4
7/7/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 30
Matthew 2:7-15

On being a better sinner

In a sentence:

The true meaning and catastrophe of sin is known only to faith

I'd like to begin this morning with the observation that most of you are lousy sinners. By this I mean that you – and I with you – don't sin very well. And this is a serious shortcoming for us all because it is the poverty of the quality of our sinning which is the source of our continuing fears and uncertainties in faith. The more accomplished our sin, the deeper will be our faith.

As a way into justifying why this might be the case, we let's consider the relationship between our readings from Hosea and Matthew this morning. Those passages are linked by Matthew's assessment of the Holy Family's return from Egypt after taking refuge there from Herod. This looks like prophecy and fulfilment: while Hosea was in fact looking back to the Exodus, Matthew's borrows 'out of Egypt I called my son' and makes it appear as if Hosea is looking *forward*: here is an old prophecy about Jesus, now fulfilled.

But Matthew's borrowing from Hosea is much more significant than this; in fact, it is so significant as to change our reading of Hosea – and of ourselves – altogether. For Matthew does not claim a prophecy to be fulfilled in Jesus. Rather, he identifies what is called, technically, a 'type' in the Exodus from Egypt and links it to Jesus, the 'antitype'. An antitype is an overlay of an event or person on an earlier one – on the type. This links the two in mutual interpretation, although 'skewed' towards the later. The type doesn't look forward to the antitype, the first thing to the last, like a prophecy. The relationship only appears when the antitype, the last thing, appears. The Bible is full of this method of self-interpretation.

Matthew's use of Hosea in this way enables him to cast Jesus as a kind of new Israel. Matthew also describes Herod's killing of the Innocents, reflecting Pharaoh's killing of the young boys in Egypt prior to the Exodus, and his portrayal of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount casts Jesus as a new Moses. 'Out of Egypt I called my son' sends a signal about the nature and scope of what we meet in Jesus: here is the history of Israel in the process of being *recapitulated*.

But it is not merely a re-occurrence of what once happened. The antitype is the true reality of which the earlier type was a shadow. Or we might say that the type – the earlier event – is a memory of what has not yet happened.

This is easier to illustrate than to describe. Hosea 11 gives an account of the coming into covenant of God and Israel, then Israel's turning away, the punishment, God's longing for restoration and a promised reconciliation. Matthew's casting of Jesus as Israel invites a comparison here: the intimate relationship between parent and child (the Father-Son relationship), a turning away and punishment (Good Friday), the longing of God for a restoration of the relationship (Easter Saturday), and the restoration itself

(Easter Day). The life of Jesus from incarnation to the resurrection repeats the history of Israel as Hosea describes it.

But in a typological reading – the dynamic of type and antitype – Jesus' experience from incarnation to resurrection is not an echo of Hosea's account of Israel. Rather, Hosea's account is an echo, or a memory, of what happens to Jesus.

That requires a bit of reflection because we are used to thinking of all which precedes Jesus as pointing to him, building up to him, so that what is remembered is how we got to that point. And perhaps there remains a sense in which this is so.

But the crucial point is this: while this section of Hosea is important for understanding who Jesus is, it is not as mere 'illustration' that Hosea relates to Jesus. Hosea's preaching does not give us the clue to Jesus. Hosea relates to Jesus as a reflection of him, as a memory of him, now revealed as such because the truth of Jesus himself has been revealed. Jesus, then, gives us the clue to Hosea's preaching. The rejection of God by Israel described in Hosea is the crucifixion of Jesus. The promised restoration is the resurrection of Jesus. Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are the *meaning* of what Hosea describes, accuses of and promises.

This is not mere theological trickery. The consequences of this way of thinking are, in fact, quite stunning – and now we come to why believing more profoundly makes better sinners of us.

We noted last week in Hosea's 2750 year old text – and we experience every day of our lives here and now – that the promised restoration or resurrection by God has not occurred. This is to say that we and Hosea's original audience reflect or echo the restoration and resurrection in Jesus imperfectly. It has happened for him but not yet fully for us. But this is also to say that our *rejection* of God has not properly occurred, that we also echo the crucifixion imperfectly.

Put differently, there is a sense in which we are not restored because we have not yet sinned well enough. This is clearly wrong... but we'll stick with it for a moment to see whether it might still get us to where we need to go. To say that we have not yet sinned well enough is *not* to say that we haven't – between us – managed to commit every sin which can be committed; we seem to have that covered. *Committing* sins is not problem but recognising what we do wrong *as sin is* a problem. That is, we do not really *know* ourselves as *sinners*. It is easy to know a *moral* failure, but moral failure is only half-sin. A half-sinner will only be half-reconciled to God, and so feel that the good, restorative things promised are still 'not yet'.

If this is the case, what is required here is not a deeper 'wallowing' in sin or a talking-up of the sinfulness of human being. The understanding of sin is not a matter of heaping something up. The clue is found, again, in Jesus. Israel's problem is that when it hears Hosea declare, 'out of Egypt I called my son', the people don't *really* understand that it is *them* he refers to. The catastrophe is in the failure to *be* 'son' – child – to this divine mother, father – the failure to thrive in the peace of being lifted to *this* divine cheek and the failure to die after wriggling out of that embrace. What is lost is so central to their – and our – being that, once lost, it is no longer understood.

By contrast, on every page of the New Testament Jesus is the one who definitively hears and responds to the address 'son.' All that he is and does springs from that address and answers it. In crucifying *this one*, Israel denies the true form of sonship, the true form of intimate relationship with God. The sin of Israel, then, has no proper reference point for Israel itself. It is 'mere' sin, 'mere' distance from God. The only thing which

can give sin its *quality* as sin – which can make us ‘high quality’ sinners rather than lousy ones – is a renewed experience of the intimacy with God. In the great parable, the prodigal son forgets what it means to be a son and imagines he is a servant (and the older brother makes the same mistake). This is the prodigal’s true sin, to which the waiting father answers ‘*not servant, but son*’. It is the light of such a restoration which reveals sin for what it *was* and *will be* if we allow ourselves that option again. Salvation makes *real* sinners of us – if *redeemed* sinners.

It is for this reason that the only real sin is the destruction in crucifixion of the Son of God *as a son, as the child of God*; every other sin is just a ‘memory’ or an ‘echo’ of this – not quite the real deal even if we can discern the pattern in it. And it is for this reason that the only thing which will deal with sin is the *return* of the Son, the return of such intimacy with God.

And so Jesus is raised, that the Son might be once more and that we might see and know and understand.

And so we break bread and bless a cup, and take to eat and drink, that together *we might be* that Son in our own re-Spirited flesh-and-blood life together.

Out of Egypt God calls *us*, to discover ourselves to be daughters and sons in the Son, to know our sin – and to know it *behind* us – and to rejoice.

By the grace of God, may such knowledge and joy be ever more deepened in all God’s people. Amen.
