

**Pentecost 11**  
**25/8/2019**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Hosea 13:4-8, 13:12-14:1**

**Psalm 32**

**Galatians 4:4-7**

**Luke 13:31-35**

**God's stillborn children**

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*In a sentence:*

*We are called to 'step up' to be the children of God*

Does God really send the cruel Assyrians as punishment for Israel's sin, so that the people's 'little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open'?

The warning that God would do this appears often enough in the prophets, those champions of justice who fire our political imaginations and yet whom we would like to edit here, and more than just a little.

We hesitate at this point because this ancient terrorism continues as modern terrorists maim and kill for God's sake. We hesitate because Hosea's reading of history as a sign of God's judgement also continues: AIDS or earthquakes or bushfires have been declared by some to be the response of God to this or that moral failure. We hesitate for our own sake: if something goes wrong in my life, did I *deserve* it? The plaintive cry, 'Why has this happened to me?', makes the connection Hosea seems to make: perhaps it happened because of sin.

And not least, we hesitate because we cannot reconcile the God of love with such brutality. Does God do such things? Does God pose to us this kind of threat?

The short answer is, No: AIDS, the earthquake, the bushfire and the Assyrians were coming anyway. And yet Hosea connects historical events and judgement; we cannot simply dismiss him and the other prophets here.

It helps to pose another question: Does God send Jesus to die on the cross? At first glance, this is not quite the same question, even if the idea is equally grating to modern sensibility. Yet we have already noticed the similarity between what happened to Jesus and what happened to Israel (Hosea 3.2). On this understanding, *Jesus* becomes the 'little one' dashed, the expectant mother under cruel steel.

But if there are similarities between the fates of Israel and Jesus, there is also an important difference: in Hosea, the oncoming storm is the terrifying Assyrian army; in the case of Jesus, the oncoming storm is Israel itself – Jerusalem, the only place where a prophet should be killed (Luke 13). The question about God being a threat to us in the form of an army or some other plague becomes one of whether we are a threat to God. These two scriptural threads portray, respectively, God and the people of God approaching each other with murderous intent.

And yet, there is an asymmetry here, and it is not that God always wins. The difference between these two conflicts becomes clearer through Hosea's evocative mockery of Israel – in the guise of 'Ephraim' – in the middle of our reading this morning:

<sup>13</sup> The pangs of childbirth come for [Israel],  
but he is an unwise son;  
for at the proper time he does not present himself  
at the mouth of the womb.

Hosea describes Israel as having refused to be born, and so as not being really alive. This makes no sense literally, of course. Clearly they were alive as most of us are. And this, to allow ourselves to be drawn into their story, was their problem: in their identity as the children of God (Hosea 11), they are not quite born. Israel is 'unborn' in the sense of Nicodemus, whom Jesus told, You must be born again (John 3).

God does not 'send' the Assyrians, in the sense of set the historical wheels in motion. Rather, their coming is *cast* as judgement, echoes the judgement. A child which will not be born is death to itself, and to its mother. Hosea proclaims the devastating effect of the Assyrians as proof of what is already the case: Israel is stillborn. God is the *context* of the Assyrian conquest, not its cause, and as the context God brings a particular reading of that disaster. The Assyrians are just doing what Assyrians do: conquest and pillage; Hosea overlays the disaster with meaning in order to reveal what is at stake between God and Israel.

And now we come to the asymmetry of what I called the murderous the approaches of God and Israel to each other. If Israel is a son who refuses to born, there was another son waiting to be born in our readings this morning, described by Paul:

But when the [proper time] had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman...  
(Galatians 4.4-7).

Jesus approaches Israel as one born 'at the proper time' (literally, 'in the fullness of time') and here is the contrast with Israel in Hosea. In Jesus is one *born*, in the fullness of that expression: he is one really *alive*. And so his death becomes a real death and different from that which Israel suffered at the hands of the Assyrians, or from what anyone else suffers. For, being truly born and truly alive, only Jesus really *moves* in the gospel story. Jerusalem is static, waiting for him. The same might be said of Israel and the Assyrians. Both these really only do what usually happens here: the weak is subject to the strong, and nothing new is seen, nothing really moves. It is only when God *claims* the Assyrians that movement happens, that meaning enters, that a new word is said and heard – even if it is a deathly word:

Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, [we heard last week]  
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,  
and my judgement goes forth as the light (6.5).

The crushing army becomes the occasion for the revealing of God's justice and of the expectation that God's justice shape the lives of God's people.

The Assyrians, or the leaders in Jerusalem, or the earthquake, or the Russians, or the Chinese, or the Americans, or the ecological apocalypse are always coming. The world ticks over as Ecclesiastes describes: 'for everything, a season' (Ecclesiastes 3). But this is not truly an unfolding of history, not really a movement, not really the entry of a new thing under the sun; it is just the world turning, around and around, and our lives upon it a vain chasing of the wind.

Only God really moves, and God's true children. The proof of this is that Jesus moves even when he is supposed to be dead. The question which Hosea puts – with the rest of the Scripture – is, When the time of the sword comes, which kind of children will we be?

God's call, to shift to the similar metaphor in Paul, is to enter into our inheritance, to cease being 'slaves' buffeted by the whim of a master and to become true children – and so heirs – of God's promise. To be less than this is really only to wait in fear and without understanding for whatever horror might be about to rise on our horizon, and to set ourselves for defence against it.

For if we are true children of this God, we know that God comes with every dawn, looking to see in our response to the joys and terror of the new day: whose children are we?

The children of God know that nothing can separate them from God in Christ Jesus the Son, our brother by adoption (Romans 8; Galatians 4).

Let us seek, then, to be children of the light (1 Thessalonians 5.5), that we might, in all things, see clearly our way in the ways of God, and that others might see with us.

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