

The lectionary gives us two very interesting readings today. The reading from the Old Testament prophet Hosea and the gospel of Luke might not at first glance appear to have much in common. However, I want to suggest that they're both about the subject of desire. So, I'm going to say something about both readings in where that shared theme overlaps. I'll say more about the reading from Hosea, largely because it's one of my favorite books in the Bible, and this chapter 11 set for today is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible. If we're to understand the message of Hosea, then, we need to go back to the beginning of the book briefly to the first three chapters. And what we read there is the account of the prophet Hosea's relationship with a woman called Gomer.

Gomer was told by... Well, Hosea was told by God to marry Gomer, even though she was a harlot and someone who was unlikely to be faithful to him. So, they got married, but sure enough, after they were married, Gomer went after many lovers. And God spoke again to Hosea and told him to go and to woo her back. And this part of Hosea's story at the beginning is key to understanding the rest of the book, including chapter 11, which we've heard read. The voice of God in this chapter is the voice of a hurt parent or a spurned lover.

It's very clear in this passage, is that God's desire is that the people of Israel return to him. The children of Israel have wandered away, and this is clearly something which pains God, which hurts him deeply. Our passage begins with God speaking, "When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt, I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went away from me. They kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols." God speaks here as a parent about their child, Israel. The picture that's created is one of an ungrateful rebellious child who walks away from their parent, a child that's not only inattentive, but deliberately unresponsive to the loving overtures of their parent.

Israel's walking away from God consisted of sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols. And that's something that comes up time and again in the book Hosea. And this is what the prophet calls unfaithfulness. That's where the story of Gomer fits in. Just as Gomer had other lovers to her husband so

Israel took other gods. Both have been unfaithful. Hosea was called to woo Gomer back as an illustration of how God wants to draw his own people back. Chapter 11 of Hosea is a love song. It's God crying out to his people through the prophet saying, "Come back. I love you. I've always loved you."

There's an emotion and intimacy in this chapter, which might be said to be unique in the Old Testament. The way God speaks of his people isn't just relational or personal, it's intimate. As I've said, this is God speaking as a grieving parent, a spurned lover. God appears hurt in this passage. He says, "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with chords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

This chapter of Hosea gives us a glimpse into the heart of God. The God, who is love, wants to be in a loving, faithful relationship with his people. God speaks here like a broken-hearted, grieving parent. "How can I give you up Ephraim? How can I hand you over, oh Israel?", says the Lord. I heard an amazing interview on the radio a few years ago. It was the mother of a pop star. I think he's probably more famous in England than he is over here, Pete Doherty, who was the singer of a band called The Libertines, who were popular at the time.

He was famous, too, for being an erstwhile boyfriend of Kate Moss and someone who had a serious drug problem. His mother was a very sensible woman of faith, and she was talking in this interview about her Peter. And it was an incredibly sad and emotional interview. She sounded just exhausted and helpless. She reminisced about Peter as a boy. She remembered the many good years, but then she began to talk about the years where she'd lost him to drugs. He wasn't himself anymore. He was unpredictable. Sometimes, he'd go off and they wouldn't know where he was, and he'd be gone for a long time and then suddenly reappear at home, and she didn't know how to deal with it. She didn't know what was the best line to take. Her husband had clearly started to practice tough love and wouldn't have anything to do with it till he gave up the drugs.

And she could see the value in that approach, but she couldn't bring herself to go down that same line. "He's still my son," she said. "I still love him." And as I heard her voice coming over the radio, I heard something of the voice of God, in Hosea chapter 11. "How can I give up on you, Israel," God says. "I've lost you to your idols. You've been unfaithful, but you are still my beloved, my chosen people." There was a man in Bangkok called Sawat, who got caught up in the drugs and prostitution business, which made him very, very rich. It also made him lots of enemies. And things started to unravel for him. There was a rumor went round Bangkok that he was a police spy so he had to get out. And in the midst of his fear, not being quite sure where to go, he remembered his family who he'd left years before. His parents were simple, Christian people from a rural town in the south that he'd left many years before, and the last words he'd heard them say to him were, "We'll wait for you."

So, he wondered in his fear in the middle of the city, would his parents still be waiting for him? Would they be still there after he'd brought so much dishonor and shame to the family name? So, he thought the only way to find out is to write them a letter and warn them of his coming. So he wrote to them and said, "I'm coming on the train on Saturday night. I need to lie low for a bit. I'd really like to stay with you. But if not, if it's been too long, I fully understand, and I won't bother you. But if you'll take me in, then just tie a piece of white cloth around the pole tree at the bottom of the garden."

So, Saturday night came, he was on the train. The train was getting near to the village, and he could hardly bear to look to see if there was anything on the tree. So, he said to the guy next to him, "Just look at that house coming up. There's a tree at the end of the garden. Just tell me if there's a piece of white cloth on it." So, the stranger looked out of the window. Then the man said, "What do you see?" He said, "I see a tree covered, every branch, with white cloths." So Sawat got the message. His parents had waited for him. They couldn't wait to take him home.

And Hosea invites us to conceive of God as that waiting, loving parent, just as Jesus himself did in that parable that's so familiar to us, the parable of the prodigal son, which could just as easily be called the parable of the loving, waiting father, waiting to take

the errant son home. We're called to repent, to turn back to God. Not because God's mad, but because he's hurt, in the same way a parent is hurt and grieves for their prodigal children. God's love for his people is a maternal, vulnerable, giving kind of love. St. Paul writes about God's divine love. In Romans chapter 8, he writes this, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depths, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

So, let's turn briefly to that gospel reading in the context of God's love for the world so beautifully depicted by Hosea and St. Paul. As I said at the beginning, this passage, too, is about desire. It's a parable about a man whose desire was for an abundance of possessions. The thing is, this desire just seems so shallow when put in the context of God's divine love. Surely making peace with the God who made us, whose love for us extends beyond the material world, is more important than how much we could fit into a barn.

And the parable that Jesus told about the rich man than his barns is prompted by someone standing next to Jesus. This is Jesus, the incarnate son of God, coming to the world to save sinners, and this man turns to Jesus and says, "Do me a favor. Will you intervene in a family feud that I've got going on? Please tell my brother to split the inheritance equally between us." On reflection, in the grand scheme of things, is this, do you think, what that man really wanted or should have asked Jesus? If he had his time again, would he ask the same question? He managed to reduce Jesus, the son of God, to an estate lawyer. Let's not make the same mistake of desiring the wrong things, of asking for the wrong things, of pursuing the wrong things. May we desire above all, and treasure above all, the love of the God who made us. May we value, more highly than anything else, a love that will not let us go, a love from God that knows no end. Amen.