

Hosea 11:1-11

On this Mothering Sunday it is quite natural that we think of the love of our mothers even if they may have died many years ago. Mind you I'm not sure how loving my Mum's suet pudding really was.

It is through human love, imperfect as it always is, that we understand something of the love of God. However in the prophecy of Hosea it is the imperfections of human love that God focuses on. Hosea is a dramatic story of a man's love for his unfaithful wife and through it we see the faithful love of God for unfaithful people.

Today on Mothering Sunday I want to look at this passage from Hosea and see something of the depths of God's love for us humans who in general are wayward and unfaithful and for us as individuals as we acknowledge our own lives in which we often stray away from God and let him down.

1. God's love

God's love in these opening verses is described in very anthropomorphic ways.

So in v1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him". It is the familiar picture of the mother who has her child and who holds the child in her arms. Yes as the child grows there is the pain of arm ache but in love the parent holds the child. Here God is speaking about his electing love. He has chosen Israel to be his people and refers in the verse to them as his children – my son. It was God who brought about the relationship even as it is the parents who in giving birth to the child bring about a relationship. Here is the love of God who initiates a relationship with him. Often when I am talking to a couple who are getting married I ask the question who initiated the relationship who asked who out? With a child you don't need to ask who initiated the relationship with their parents and with us and God we don't have to ask. If you are here today or listening to this as a download and you are a follower of Jesus it is because God loves you and by his Spirit initiated a relationship with you through the Son and if you are not a follower of Jesus then God the Father, because of his love, is calling you out of Egypt, out of slavery to sin and self to become his child.

As we move on God continues to speak of his love as that of a parent who v3 teaches the child to walk and indeed God had shown his people how to walk his way. God as it were picking up Israel his child and healing them when there was hurt and pain. God speaks in v4 of his covenant love of the way he has bound himself to his people with cords of love, over and again committing himself to them as their God and them and his people.

The final image is the parent who bends down to feed the child. This was wonderfully demonstrated at Messy Church on Monday as mothers bent over their children cutting up their food for them so they could eat. It was clearly something they always did – the constant love.

Through these images God was saying to his people just see how much I love you. I chose you and called you, I love you as a Father, I hold you and heal you and bind you to myself and feed you.

Taken all together it is a wonderful picture of God's love and as I say these things I'm sure there are aspects of the love of our mothers and of our fathers that come to mind.

For us as Christians the love of God has been shown in an even greater way but again in a way that often is shown by mothers. I was reading in the press earlier in the week that apparently in this year of the diamond Jubilee of our queen we are three times richer than we were in 1952. You wouldn't believe it would you with all the press about our difficult economic times and families struggling to make ends meet! In both 1952 and today in 2012 we see tough economic times and in tough times often parents will go without in order that the youngsters may have what they need. Parents will make sacrifices for their children. In Col 3:12 the Christians are described as "God's chosen people,

holy and dearly loved” and in 1 John 4:10 we see that love defined, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God sacrificed his own son in love for us. This is how much God loves his children.

2. Israel’s unfaithfulness

God has shown his love for his people but, as is revealed through the whole of the prophecy of Hosea, that love was not reciprocated by God’s people instead as we see in v2, “But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.” God’s love and faithfulness was met by rejection and unfaithfulness on the part of his people and Hosea pictured this through his relationship with his unfaithful wife Gomer.

But many mother’s know this you may remember the BT adverts from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s with Maureen Lipman as Beattie sitting waiting for her son to call and clearly feeling rejected saying “maybe there’s something wrong with your finger, its an allergic reaction to telephones, a phobia”.

Many parents know rejection even if it is only in small ways from their children. What God experiences is very different. Here are his people bound to him in love and their reaction is to ignore him, to turn away and worship and serve other gods.

As a result the threat of judgement hangs like the sword of Damocles over the nation. Assyria was hammering at the door even as Hosea spoke as we see in v5, “will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?” They could look forward to the sound of swords clashing on the streets of their cities and the destruction of their city walls, v6.

Judgement and destruction lie ahead because here was a people loved by God who rejected that love.

But let’s not think these people are different or worse than any others. No they are just like us or rather we are just like them.

As I watched the clip from Maureen Lipman and heard the words “so you can’t phone. You can’t pick up a phone and dial” made me think of God saying “you can’t pray? You can’t bow your head and speak to me” only I feel God wouldn’t say that though he may well feel the rejection when I fail to pray. It reminded me also of another Beattie advert where the son Melvin rings saying he’ll be late for a meal because he was working and when Beattie offers to bring him a sandwich and then a jumper he says “I don’t need a jumper Mum this is a modern air-conditioned building” She replied that he hadn’t told her he worked in an air-conditioned building and when he asked why would he she replied “Melvin some children talk to their parents.” Mind you when the phone went at 6am on Tuesday morning because someone in Los Angeles had forgotten that the clocks there had gone forward last weekend I didn’t quite have the same feeling!

Some children talk to their parents and of course in doing so acknowledge their parents and honour them. God wants us to acknowledge him as God, to honour him and to allow him to be God in our lives and yet we like these people in Hosea’s day are often unfaithful. When God calls us what is our response. When he calls us to an area of ministry be it small or large are we listening and ready to respond? When he calls us to lead holy lives will we put off the things that are wrong in our lives? When he calls us to listen to his word will we take time to read, to listen? When he calls us to come into his presence with our prayers will we make time to speak with God? When he calls us to go out and make disciples will we go? When he calls us to worship him will we do that with devotion and gratitude?

God had loved his people but they rejected his love and so they faced his wrath and judgement.

3. God’s amazing grace

However in vs8-9 we see a huge change where God spoke of his compassion and his inability to allow Israel to be completely destroyed as Admah and Zeboiim had been destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Deut 29:23). God declared that despite the fact that his people had rejected him and deserved his wrath he would not totally wipe them out.

Even in his wrath there was mercy.

Going back to the BT advert we see everything forgiven by the mother the moment the phone call happens. We know that parents can be forgiving. They can understand how children are. Mothers even forgiven their children when they forget mother's day.

God looked at his people the people with whom he had made a covenant who had rejected him and turned to gods who were no gods and yet in grace and mercy God refused to wipe them out. There was grace and mercy. But why, why did God refuse to destroy this rebellious people? The answer God gives in v9 is because he is God not a man.

What did God mean by that? What God means is that his willingness to forgive even these people whose rejection has hurt God is to be found in that fact that he is God and not human. As God he is infinitely more forbearing, infinitely more tender, infinitely more ready to forgive than any man ever can be.

As Charles Spurgeon said in a sermon on this verse "When God can find in man no reason for showing mercy to him, he still finds a reason for displaying his mercy, for he looks for it in his own heart. He does not say, "I will not return to destroy Ephraim, for he is not as bad as he might be, and there is really something hopeful about him." No, the Lord does not let the bucket down into that dry well; but he fetches the argument for his mercy out of himself: "For I am God." "It is not what he is, but what I am, that decides the case," says Jehovah."

These people deserve God's wrath but he does not cut them down immediately and completely because he is God.

Peter asks the question of Jesus "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answer was "I tell you not seven times but seventy times seven" (Matt 18:21-22) – why because he is God not man!

And more because he was God who was "among you". He was God who dwelt with his people was among them and with them and related to them.

How wonderfully William Cowper drew these thread together in his hymn 'Hark my soul it is the Lord' when he wrote "Can a woman's tender care Cease toward the child she bare? Yes, she may forgetful be, Yet will I remember thee."

We think of a mother's love and deep as it is we know that it can never be perfect but God's love is and more as Cowper goes on in the next verse, "Mine is an unchanging love, Higher than the heights above, Deeper than the depths beneath, Free and faithful, strong as death."

And remember that God through Hosea was speaking to those who were his people to call them to repent and to assure them of his grace.

So through this he speaks to us today who are following Jesus to hear him when he calls and repent of our unfaithfulness and to know that he is faithful and he will show compassion and mercy towards us. God's grace is there for us today as it was for these people 2800 years ago. He calls us to return and rejoice in his grace and love shown wonderfully to us in the cross of calvary. He will not give us up but let us not test God but rather turn from our sins seek his forgiveness and walk his way.