

# God's commitment to us as family

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Pentecost +7C: Hosea 1, Ps 85, Col 2, Lk 11

Before we hear Hosea 1.2-10

We're about to hear a story where God asks the prophet Hosea to marry a shameful woman – he marries Gomer a woman who may be involved in fertility rites connected with worship of the Canaanite god Baal. The marriage is an enacted parable; it's meant to show the pain of God's relationship with unfaithful Israel, where many people involved in Baal worship. Then when Hosea and Gomer have children, God tells Hosea to give them names with horrible significance.

Jezreel                      יֵזְרְעֵל                      I "May God sow" Also  
*the name of a valley famous for the atrocities of Israel's idolatrous kings*

Lo-Ruhamah                לֹא-רַחֲמָה                "Not pitied"                      God's  
*mercy is cut off*

Lo Ammi                      לֹא-אֲמִי                      "Not my people" You're  
*not mine! The most fearsome oracle any prophet had to deliver.*

Is it strange of God to ask Hosea to do these things? Does this sound like the God we know? If we want to understand this story, we need to know that the people of Israel were God's partners, like we are. Yet as God knew, they weren't behaving like a faithful partner; and they weren't raising their children as God's children.

So God asks Hosea to marry Gomer – one of these unfaithful people – and to give their children horrible names. Israel

needed to know what it means that people offer thanksgiving and worship to artificial idols instead of the living God who has given them all they have and are: what it means that they dedicate their children to these idols instead of teaching them know the true God's love. But listen specially for the end of this story, where God's love is stronger than God's anger. *READINGS*

**Sermon:** Today's readings confront us with the way we see God; the apparent difference we see between the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of the New Testament. This tension is palpable in the Psalm we read this morning. At times, you could be forgiven for thinking that the psalmist is talking about two different Gods.

The first part of Psalm 85 (vv.1-7) sees God as angry and displeased, and tries to remind God to show us that kinder, gentler side that people knew and loved once upon a time. The second part, (vv.8-13) asserts a God who meets us with words of peace, with the promise of salvation, the intimacy of a kiss, and the good gifts of truth and plenty. So when we recited that Psalm, we sounded as though we were talking about two different Gods: the old fire and brimstone one first, and then the gentle, sensitive New Testament God. That's a real tension for us.

We also get a sense of this tension in the letter to the Colossians and in the Gospel. Today's reading from Colossians warns members of that Christian community not to be taken in by people who encourage them to *prove* their faith through rituals – like adopting traditional Jewish religious customs like circumcision, eating only kosher foods and observing the festivals – as though God wants to be appeased by public piety. No, this Letter tells them that outward signs are not what God wants. Don't allow these people to make you feel disqualified from the Faith just because you don't follow all their religious practices. The love you share with Jesus is the only measure of your faith; not getting some arcane

religious ritual correct.

There's a pattern developing in our readings, isn't there: a theme running through the Scriptures which teaches us that outward show is hollow; that pious religious observance can even take us away from God. But even more disturbing, we may read of the ministry of a Godly prophet like Hosea, and somehow misconstrue what God is saying through him. We can see his portrait of God in the opposite way to what's intended; and so we may decide that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God revealed in Jesus. But this is not right. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God revealed in Jesus are one and the same. The message about God in the Scriptures is much more than the means of its delivery. Hosea's message is more than just a challenge to infidelity and complacency and decadence. Even though that challenge *is* God's word given for a particular time and situation, the full message is what lies behind that prophecy.

The full message is God's commitment to us; it's the commitment of a God who addresses us not as minions, but as partners – as family. The message is that God's commitment to us as family is utterly real – to us and our children and to all the families of Earth whom God intends to bless through us.

This family partnership we have with God is the heart of today's Gospel passage.

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."* <sup>2</sup> *He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name."*

The first thing Jesus teaches his friends about praying is to call *his* Father God *our* Father. This has special cultural significance. In that part of the world these days, I'm called *Abu Andrāwus* – father of Andrew. I'm named in the expectation

that if I ever have a son, he'll be named after my father. So I am forever the custodian of my father's good name; his honour depends on me. It's the same when God's children bear God's name; we are the shop-front of the holy Name – the way the world sees God. So it's important that we faithfully represent God's character to the world. *(cf Jeremiah 13 – mentioned in my weekly*

*– where Israel is represented as the intimate clothing in which God's earthly presence is presented to Earth)*

We're the ambassadors of the sacred Name on Earth.

The sacred Name; what do we call God? For some of us, the name *Father* is a difficult issue; what about people who've experienced abusive fathers, and so don't want to relate to God as Father? At the same time, these abused people are misunderstood by others who've had positive experience of worshipping of God as Father; who find calling God anything else sacrilegious. It's tricky.

What today's Scriptures teach us is that God wants a family partnership with us; not a friendship – a family partnership which cannot be broken by anything. Nothing can stop you being somebody's child – not even death. And that basic message is not affected by whether we call God Father or Mother or anything else that expresses an unbreakable, trustworthy relationship.

But where does that leave us? There's still great potential for hurt in that difference of opinion. I think God deals with this in typically humorous fashion. You see, the other thing God does to us by calling us all children is to make us brothers and sisters with each other, and as we all know, brothers and sisters will never agree.

So having set things up this way, I don't expect God is worried if we never reach a consensus on things like 'our Father' or 'our Mother'. But by the same token, God has also made sure that we can never ignore our differences either. By making us brothers and sisters, God has made sure that the bond between us is one that nothing can break, no matter how

much we disagree on things. So we're stuck with God's delight in diversity, and with our own various forms of conservatism that make us struggle with it all.

The sense in all this became very poignant for me in a conversation I had with someone who was very worried about being rejected by God: the worry had come up because of a fire and brimstone sermon this person had heard.

Armed with this week's readings, I was able to illustrate for this person my absolute confidence that absolutely nothing could make God reject them, because we were talking about the God who, in the Hebrew Scriptures forcefully reminds us that we are inseparably God's partners and children. And in the New Testament, that same God in Jesus teaches us that the first thing we must acknowledge about our relationship with the Divine is that it's a relationship that cannot be broken. Jesus has done this by giving us the privilege of calling God by the Name which meant most to Jesus himself. In English today, *Father* is a pretty formal way of addressing your Dad. The way Jesus would've said it to his friends was to use his native Aramaic word, *Abba*; a more familiar, intimate expression than *Father*. I remember how delighted I was when I first heard a little Israeli boy we know, Jonathan, calling out to his Dad to come and push him on the swing: his word was, of course, *Abba!* Amen.