

**PENTECOST 7C 24-07-2022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Hosea 1.2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2.6-15; Luke 11.1-13

*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.'*

*He said to them, 'When you pray, say:*

*Father, hallowed be your name.*

*Your kingdom come.*

*Give us each day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our sins,*

*for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

*And do not bring us to the time of trial.'*

*And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'*

When I feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a parish priest, I should remind myself that things could be so much worse: God could have called me to be a prophet like Hosea.

Hosea was given the horrible job of not just preaching and warning the people of Israel, but of demonstrating what God had to say by his marriage and family life. His life was to be a sort of metaphor- but a living one that everybody could see. Hosea makes his family into a parable of broken promises.

Hosea was told to marry a woman- unpleasantly described in our Bible as 'a wife of whoredom'- and to have children with her. He married a woman named Gomer, and they had three children.

Gomer has no voice in this story, and neither do any of her children. The language describes her as a promiscuous woman; she represents unfaithful Israel in this living parable, and Hosea represents God as a wronged husband.

The shame and dishonour experienced by the husband of an unfaithful wife in a deeply patriarchal society is thus transferred in Hosea's story to God's sense of hurt and betrayal by the people of Israel.

We know nothing about Gomer, even though we occupy her place in this prophetic story; we are the people Hosea addresses. Her experience, the human experience, is not the centre here; God's emotional experience is. As one commentator has written,

*'Hosea's marital drama models the emotional life of the Lord's experience with Israel, in sorrow, anger, and longing....The names of Hosea's three children seem to stand for God's shamed remembering, burned anger, and resigned abandonment.'*

How can we make sense of this in our age, concerned as we are about intimate partner violence and the sometimes-lethal actions of jealous husbands?

What if the prophet had been a woman? How might that change the story? What shames and violences of marriage would she use to invite her audience to identify with God's experience?

Comparing our relationship with God to a messed-up marriage, in which one spouse is repeatedly unfaithful but repeatedly forgiven and taken back and always loved, is a bit of a scandal; but then it is

intended to shock. Prophets need to shock us into action, to make us think and re-assess, to repent and turn back to the God who will always, always take us back.

In the letter to the Colossians, the writer warns against philosophy and empty deceit taking Christians captive. He wanted his readers (and that means us too) to understand that once we belong to Christ through baptism, nothing else is necessary.

He is warning us that there will be people who tell us that we are not really saved, we can't truly be God's people, unless...insert regulation here. In Paul's time the threat came from those who insisted that Christian males must be circumcised and follow the Jewish Law.

In our time, you may know of churches that place restrictions on members as to who they can marry or associate with. Closer to home, there are some that insist that Christians must believe exactly what they are taught: that God created the world in 6 days only a few thousand years ago, or that every single word in the Bible (the King James Version only of course) is inspired by God and is literally, factually true.

Paul says do not let anyone disqualify you or condemn you, because you are alive in Christ and belong in the body of Christ.

Don't let anyone tell you that you are not a 'real' Christian because you don't conform to what they say you should be: baptised as an adult, born-again in the Spirit, whatever their criteria may be.

What IS a 'real' Christian, you may ask? My answer would be- anyone who WANTS to be a Christian.

Anyone who looks at Jesus and wants to be like him, wants to be better than they are, wants to start again, or maybe wants their sense of shame or guilt dealt with once and for all.

Perhaps one of the first things we do when we realise that there might be something in this religion lark is to try to pray. Some of us may be lucky enough to have learnt to pray when we were very young, taught by our parents and following their example. Some of us had to learn later in life.

It's interesting that Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray, because they were all Jewish and would have been praying all their lives. They must have thought that Jesus had a different way to teach them; and so he taught them the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer.

It is a deceptively simple prayer, although some of the words are tricky to translate, remembering that Jesus spoke Aramaic but the Gospels were written in Greek.

It starts by acknowledging God's holiness and asking that God's purposes for creation are fulfilled: your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. We are asking God to change us and expressing our willingness to BE changed. Not a small thing.

Then we ask for three essential needs to be met: for food, forgiveness, and faithfulness. We pray 'do not bring us to the time of trial' rather than 'lead us not into temptation', because we are asking God to keep us faithful through any circumstances that might threaten or endanger our faith. For the early Christians, persecution and even torture were threats that might force people to deny their faith; today we can probably think of all kinds of situations that can challenge our faith, including sickness, grief, and the bad behaviour of clergy.

In the verses following the prayer Jesus goes on to talk about being persistent and not giving up if our prayers seem to go unanswered. He tells us that if even imperfect parents who love their children can give them good things, how much more will God give us? God is more than the very best a human parent could be and loves us more than we can imagine.

Our Bible readings today have presented us with a number of vivid images of God. In Hosea God is like a husband who longs for his unfaithful wife to come back; in the letter to the Colossians we see the whole fulness of God present in Christ Jesus; and in Luke's gospel we see God as a loving parent who wants only the best for God's children.

When we pray, however we pray, let's remember that the God of the universe hears us, loves us, and always wants us to keep in touch!

The Lord be with you.