

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 31/7/2016

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9,43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Some of you may have already read my reflection in *From the Vicar* this morning. If so, you will already have noticed that it is a longer one today. Primarily its length is to enable the inclusion of what I think is a quite stunning prayer, written by Rt Revd Pierre Whalon, bishop-in-charge of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. As someone who ministers across the continent of Europe, he understands only too well how the recent acts of terror have impacted people there, and his lament is entitled "How long, O Lord, how long?"

This is a cry which not only has its roots in the pages of Scripture right from the beginning of creation, but is echoed in so many places in the world at the moment, as faithful Christians (and indeed faithful Muslims and Jews also) utter the same cry...

This is why, for me this week, it was not the parable of Christ which found root in me, although God knows just how much this world also needs to hear Jesus' words of correction against our propensity to accumulate wealth at a staggering pace.

Nor was it the Epistle reading that appealed to me, as much as the author of the letter to the Colossians emphasizes the importance of looking to things of heaven, rather than things of earth - again, a valid message for us at this time.

Rather, it was the words of the Prophet which resonated with me this week. Into this space in which we find ourselves - this difficult time of pain and anguish - we hear today words from the Prophet, Hosea. And I think that if ever we needed to pay heed to Prophetic words and Prophetic promises the time is now.

Those who are tempted to believe that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with judgment (while the New Testament is about grace) must surely be stripped of such illusions by today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no more poignant portrayal of the agony of God, who is torn between the demands of judgment and of grace. The images of both parent and spouse are used to emphasize the love of God, a love that is continually spurned by a sinful people.

“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 cords 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.” (Hos. 11:3-4)

Hosea, we hear today, agonized over the fate of his nation and suffered enormous pain as he described Israel's destructive waywardness before God. As one reads the text, it becomes clear that Hosea's pain is nothing other than the pain of God.

Yet the God of Israel cannot come to the point of destroying finally and irredeemably, for such a step would violate God's essential nature. When justice and grace are weighed in God's balances, grace always prevails.

Our reading today emphasizes the helplessness of the beloved. If Yahweh had not loved Israel and nurtured it, Israel would not even have survived. Yet the tragic irony is that “The more I called them, the more they went from me.” (Hos.11:2)

How much, as we hear the terrible and destructive events of the world around us today, does this same idea ring true - “The more I called them, the more they went from me”. It simply cannot be true, I think, that God desires anything of what we see around us - this cannot be God's Will - for this is not the God I know and understand and have experienced in my own life.

Rather, I know a God who does call - gently, yet persistently - to return to God's ways. To experience again the perfect freedom that Paul speaks of to the Colossians. To understand the Grace so epitomized in the person of Jesus Christ.

And yet...

And yet...

The people of this world who are intent on evil will have their way with us, it seems, to the point where a faithful and good Bishop like Pierre Whalon sums up the feeling of us all, as he cries “how long, O Lord, how long?”

But here is where we need to be careful, I think - careful that in our distress and our pain we do not seek to call on God to act in a way that we as humans might find acceptable. Remember the wisdom of Isaiah here as caution - “your ways are not my ways, says the Lord. And in that light, then, I don’t, indeed I can’t expect that God will send down thunderbolts and rain fire down from heaven against those who commit such brutality - even if, in my honest moments, that is exactly what I would wish.

Hosea stands as a reminder that judgment exacts a price from the one who is judged as well as from the one who does the judging. The sin of the people has brought suffering on them, but Yahweh suffers too! So all mistaken images of the prophet motivated by rage, all mistaken images of a God whose basic emotion is anger are cast aside by Hosea.

Indeed, the suffering God of Hosea anticipates nothing less than the suffering Christ of Gethsemane and of Calvary’s cross. And this is a suffering of non-violence; precisely what it is we commemorate and enact here in the Eucharist. Giles Fraser, the great UK Priest and Theologian reminded me of that this week as he reflected on the murder of Fr. Jacques Hamel. “The Mass”, he said, “is the non-violent absorption of human violence.” In all that Christ endured in the cross, we believe he suffered, not to satisfy some wrathful God. No, Jesus absorbs the violence that comes from *us* not from God. He receives our blows, our punishments, our disdain. And, despite his innocence - or, rather, precisely because of it - he refuses to answer back in kind

This is why we find ourselves today, despite the brokenness of life, astonished by the vastness of God's love. "For we inhabit a world brought into existence by a word we are unable to speak, redeemed by a sacrifice we are unable to make, and transformed by a resurrection we are unable to imagine." (Fr. Matthew Anstey.)

Hosea speaks for God to a world of brokenness which had gone astray; a people who had wandered from God, and perhaps deserved nothing less than the wrath of God. Instead, we see in Hosea, how God suffered along with the people, and that God sought to draw them back to her breast.

We live today in a world that needs to hear the same words - the same message. A world yearning to hear and feel all the way down into its bones, that final life-giving word of judgment awaiting us all: "You are my people and I am your God."

In the name of Christ. Amen.