

## Hosea 11:1-11

Twenty five years ago I was at a dinner party; there have been other dinner parties since, too much of my ministry has been conducted by candlelight, with a guinea fowl that died in vain in front of me, uneaten because I had an opinion about something or other and had to explain it... at length. There have been lots of dinner parties, but this one was memorable. It was in Cambridge and another guest decided this was the night to put the priest right. It was one of those, 'Come on, admit it, religion really is nonsense' conversations. I was having none of that. I was younger then. Now, I might notice that other guests were trying to climb out of windows, or that my hostess had slumped into her trifle. I should have seen that my poor wife was trying to impale herself with the butter knife. We went on long into the night. The other guy was a scientist; it was an argument about creation. 'Creation is not a miracle', he argued, 'we know how the earth was made'. 'You do not need God to explain how the earth was made. 'No', I argued back 'that is the wrong question; we do indeed know how the sea and the mountains get made. The interesting question is not 'How did it happen?' The interesting question is 'Why does anything exist; why is there something when there could be nothing at all?'"

We keep assuming that religion is all about explanations and answers. Why did Sarah Jane get cancer? Why was there an earthquake in China? What makes someone a terrorist? Baffled and frightened by all the things that threaten us we make religion into the explanation. God made it happen. God is the reason that she got cancer, God sent the earthquake, God told me to kill people. We talk about God as though God was a slightly grander version of the Bishop, or the President of the United States; the biggest boss of all. It makes God very unpleasant indeed, it makes God a cruel God who rushes in and out of creation doing strange and even nasty things. But it does at least explain why things happen and we do so want that explanation.

I know this is a bit challenging for a Sunday morning, but it is quite important. The first reading we heard started like this:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*

It was the voice of the prophet Hosea. Hosea is telling us that God loved Israel from before the beginning. Hosea wants us to know that God loves Israel without a reason. Israel did nothing. God loves inexplicably. This is the big idea we have to try to fix in our heads. We read the Old Testament and we keep looking for the explanations. God was cross with Ahab, God punished Sodom and Gomorrah, God admired King David. We keep looking for the reasons. But the big idea in the Old Testament, the really big idea is that there are none. It all begins with Genesis when God creates the earth out of nothing at all. In Genesis God speaks to Abraham who is childless and hopeless and promises to make him into a great nation. In Exodus God tells Israel that he will end their slavery. There is no explanation given. There is no reason. God loves just because he loves. It is the same statement again and again

*I have loved you with an everlasting love Jeremiah 31:3  
Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples Deuteronomy 10:15*

This is what Hosea wants us to know and it is the point I made as I got wild-eyed at that dinner party. The really interesting thing about God is not that he explains things, but that he is the mystery at the heart of everything. God does create, God does love, but not for any reason that we can fathom. God is not like us, he will have his reasons but they are not familiar to us.

Hosea is a really odd book, Hosea it has to be said, is a very odd person indeed. The book begins with the Lord speaking to Hosea and telling him to go and marry a prostitute:

*The LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom"* Hosea 1:2

So Hosea marries the prostitute Gomer and she bears his children. What is happening here is that Hosea is acting out the story of Israel. Israel has been unfaithful it worships a God called Baal, Israel prostitutes itself. So, in prostituted Israel a prophet marries a prostitute.

*She conceived and bore a son. Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."* Hosea 1:8-9

Now this is the God we look for. This is the God who gets cross about unfaithfulness and punishes. This is the God who has reasons and actions we recognise. We got that in today's reading:

*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. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king*

Hosea 11:4-5

God was good, and we were disobedient, so there was punishment, slavery, invasion from Assyria. Here surely is the God who explains why bad stuff keeps happening? That is certainly a little of what is going on here. Israel is worried, frightened to death in fact. It is in crisis and it remembers terrors of old. Did you hear those strange names in the reading?

*How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?* Hosea 11:8

Admah and Zeboiim were the little towns near Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the story of Israel's worst fears, the story of a God who explains things, God who is the reason why it happens. But listen to what Hosea says

*I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst* Hosea 11:9

God will *not* do what they expect. It is exactly what Hosea learnt when he married the prostitute, he thought it was going to be like that forever, a punishment everyone deserved, but God suddenly announces that is not how it will be at all.

*I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.* Hosea 2:19-20

And notice there is no reason given. God is not like the nations and empires, not like Assyria or Egypt who are relentless and who demand obedience. Israel is disobedient, Israel is sinful and God has compassion. It is inexplicable. God's love is not reasonable and not an explanation.

We like explanations. We like the world to conform to the rules we make. That makes the world safer; that helps us know where we are. We want to be able to explain. I got stopped this week walking to the cathedral by someone who wanted me to explain why you would want to kill an elderly priest in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray. I cannot really explain that. What I want you to notice instead is that Hosea does not describe a God who is familiar, a God who has reasons we can label and tidy away.

When a priest has his throat cut at mass, when a lorry is driven into a crowd on Bastille Day, when a boy takes a gun into a shopping mall, or a former care worker stabs disabled victims in their beds, we ask 'Why?' We ask 'What should we do?' We want an explanation and an action we can take. Over and again, we want than explanation. We want explanations now.

When all else fails we make God the explanation and God is not the explanation we seek. God is a different way of thinking altogether.

Let me explain. For many statements I make there is an obvious question that follows. If I tell you a priest was murdered in his church you will reasonably ask, 'Why?' If I tell you that many Americans will vote for Donald Trump you will ask 'Why?' We ask Why and we wonder what we are going to do about it. What are we going to do about terrorists with knives, or Donald Trump?

Why is a good question to ask; or at least it is usually a good question to ask. Suppose however, that the statement is 'I love you'. If someone says I love you, then 'Why' is not the right question. If someone says 'I love you' a question is not what you offer in response. Nor do you wonder what are we going to do about this? In love there are no reasons and in love there are no strategies, no outcomes.

That is what Hosea is driving at. God loves, God loves before we have earned love, forgives before we have earned forgiveness. No explanation works, no strategy will effect an outcome. God, quite simply undermines all the politics and all the power we are used to. God is a different way of being and a different way of doing. And that is what we need to remember this morning and at the church of Saint-Etienne in Rouvray, or on the streets of Nice. No explanation will work for us. There is no power on earth that will resolve this. There is no action we can take that will end this cycle of pain. We cannot understand or sort this and every shrill attempt to understand and sort this makes us more desperate and more dangerous.

It is what Hosea knew, what he understood. Our pain is desperate, our losses acute, we grieve. The explanation fails; the reasons fail us. They always will. It is not an explanation we need. It is not an answer that will save us; we will not be served by an answer to terrorism, a greater power to set against their power, a force to resist force, no shouting match will help us. This cathedral church is not a fortress to fight from.

Today we meet the God who loves us without explanation. Here there is compassion when we looked for retribution. Here there is forgiveness when we looked for condemnation. Here there is a love that is beyond reason, a love that will not let us go. Here there is hope when hope was failing. The temptation in our fear and our anxiety is to ask for reasons and search for solutions, it is a temptation to impose ourselves when others seek to impose on us, it is the temptation to take charge. All that can offer is more of the same, we will be equipped with good reasons to meet violence with violence. Only the love of God, unpredictable and thoroughly unreasonable can offer us hope and redemption, a different way of being. That is what Hosea is trying to tell us, that God is not like us and in that truth there is salvation.