

Sermon on Hosea 1,2-10

How do we listen to God? How do we discern his voice amongst the noise of this world and the distractions of this life? How can we hear what he has to say about our world and about where he is leading us?

The prophets of the Old Testament had it easy, we may think. The word of the LORD came to them, commanding them to say this or to do that, and then they went and said or did it. It is a completely different story from what we are used to. And if we read some of the very odd things they had to say and do, we may even find that reassuring. It may be hard for us to hear God's voice, but at least we probably won't receive upsetting commands like 'marry a prostitute', or 'walk around naked for three years', a command that was given to Isaiah. The gap between Hosea's experience and our own is huge, but therefore to some extent also comfortable.

So it was a bit unsettling for me to read what some commentaries said. Things like: 'Hosea *thought* the LORD commanded him to marry a prostitute', and 'For prophets like Hosea the experiences and events of their daily lives became laden with prophetic meaning.' It was unsettling because this way of reading the Bible was alien to me. The text says what it says, surely? And it clearly says that the LORD spoke to Hosea, and told him to marry a promiscuous wife. Otherwise he would never have done it. But it was also unsettling because I suddenly could relate to what happened to Hosea. His experience seemed to come 'closer to home', as it were. And somehow that felt uncomfortable.

This was the moment when I remembered my Doctrine class. We were told not to shy away from ideas that we found odd. Not to dismiss too soon opinions that were alien to us. And so I thought: Hang on a bit...

Suppose I try to follow this line of reasoning? Suppose I try to imagine how Hosea reflected on his marriage, and came to see a revelation of the LORD in the midst of all his misery? Suppose I just try? I may learn something new.

I remembered something else. I am sure we all have our stories about moments when we were absolutely sure that we had to say or do something. Or moments when a new and refreshing insight suddenly broke through. We did not hear a voice that we had to go and see this person. We did not have a dream telling us new things about God. We just knew. Sometimes this knowledge is so strong that we say things like: the LORD told me this or that. Even if it seemed to come out of the blue, looking back there has always been some preparation, sometimes going on for years, which we then take as confirmation that God has been leading us to that point.

This is true in a broader sense as well. Martin Luther King had a dream. Was it a real dream? I don't think so. Was it a real vision? Most likely not. It was his prophetic imagination, nurtured by the Scriptures, by his own faith, by his own experience of injustice and discrimination, that led him to challenge the status quo of white oppression.

What if it was like that for Hosea? Let us try and get to know him a little bit better. He lived and worked in the 8th century BCE, in the northern kingdom of Israel, just before it fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. It was a chaotic time. The royal line of king Jehu was wiped out (this is the event that the prophecy in verse 4 refers to) and a number of other kings followed, who all came to power by murder and conspiracy. Everyone was terrified of the growing Assyrian power, and leaders did their best to form alliances with other nations to get some protection. At the same time the people's religion was completely messed up, confusing YHWH with Baal and vice versa. They used the local

sanctuaries from the Canaanite cults, and also lots of their religious practices, without seeing this as a problem.

This is the background of Hosea's prophetic ministry. The word used here for prophet is *nabhi*, which means that he was a professional. Some of these prophets were linked to a sanctuary, others to the royal court. They were highly educated people, often belonging to a prophetic school. Common folks and kings sought their advice about minor and major issues. We can safely assume that they were trained. That they studied: the ancient Scriptures. Current affairs and events. National and international politics. Human nature. No doubt they had their discussions. All this served to get them 'tuned in', as it were, to God and to his will.

Back now to verse 2. The text doesn't tell us how the LORD spoke to Hosea. Was it in a dream? A vision? Did some of the other prophets give him a message? Did he hear a voice, like young Samuel way back in the temple? Or could the word of God have come to him in a different way?

There is another thing that I found really interesting. In Hosea's time a new prophetic style was developing. The word of the LORD no longer came through spoken messages alone, but also through enactment or symbolic action. Sometimes this action was staged. Sometimes it was a normal daily event, that the prophet reflected on and came to see as a symbol. But it is clear that being a prophet meant more than occasionally getting a message from God. It affected your whole being, your whole life, and that of those around you.

And so Hosea felt called to marry a prostitute. He may have been a good man, wanting to save this girl from her promiscuous ways. Thinking he would give her a decent life and then she would be grateful and faithful to him. But no – she just continues to sleep around. Let us look at the verses that mention the birth of the children: we get the strong

impression that only the first one is Hosea's own child. 'She bore *him* Jezreel.' The other two are just born, leaving open who the fathers were. Just imagine Hosea's pain. His sense of betrayal. The public humiliation.

But – he was a prophet. His suffering did not make him unfit for his ministry. He made it serve his ministry. His prophetic imagination was nurtured by his own experience of betrayal and unfaithfulness. And he looked around him and he just knew: God feels betrayed, as a human husband feels betrayed when his wife has cheated on him. The pain I feel must be akin to what he feels. Why are the leaders running to Egypt for help? To Egypt, of all countries! The land of slavery and servitude, from which God rescued them! And why are the people turning to Baal for comfort? Why do they prefer this tit-for-tat god, this fickle, unpredictable being, that will let you down in the end, no matter what you have offered him? Why do they prefer a Master, when I am their loving and caring husband? And so Hosea came to be the first to compare God's relationship with his people to a marriage bond. He has given us this moving, intimate metaphor, that has stayed with God's people ever since.

We are prophets. The church is the prophetic school of Jesus. We study the Scriptures. We follow the news. We pray and we discuss and we reflect. We suffer. And through it all the word of the LORD comes to us. We may be called to strange and unexpected things. We may receive new insights about God and the world. We learn to recognize injustice and evil and we find the courage to name it and to challenge it. And so the gap between Hosea and us may be not so wide after all. Let us follow his example. Let us honour his memory by being faithful in our own prophetic ministry, like he was in his.

Amen.