

September 21, 2003  
The Sunday After Holy Cross

#### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Hosea's vocation was most unusual (if that is the word we want). It all had to do with his truly miserable home life. Hosea was not directed, like Jeremiah (16:1), to remain celibate, nor was he admonished, like Ezekiel (24:15-18), not to weep at the death of his wife. Oh no, Jeremiah and Ezechiel were pikers beside Hosea. God told him, rather, to go marry a whore and beget children of her (1:2). More than that, he was commanded to love the woman (3:1).

The setting of Hosea's life was the Northern Kingdom in the mid-eighth century before Christ, during the long reign of Jeroboam II (1:1), of whom the Bible says (surprise!) that "he did evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 14:24). Just a few decades before Israel fell to Assyria in 722, it was a time of national apostasy, when "the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel" (14:26).

Like his slightly earlier contemporary Amos, Hosea sensed the impending doom and felt the same frustration at the people's refusal to repent in the face of that coming disaster. Unlike Amos, however, Hosea had relatively little to say about social sins, such as war crimes and the oppression of the poor; he was more directly concerned with that form of idolatry known as syncretism - that is, the combining of the true religion with elements, both doctrinal and ritual, from pagan religion.

In particular Hosea was concerned with the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility (Hosea 2:17). It was not accidental, Hosea believed, that the prohibition against idolatry was the very first of the commandments, because ultimately all sin is rooted in the violation of that commandment. Israel had thus sown the wind and would reap the whirlwind (8:7).

So why marry a prostitute? The message of that action was really quite simple. God had betrothed Israel to Himself in the Covenant of Mount Sinai, which several of the prophets described in the metaphors of marriage. Thus, Israel's adherence to the religion of the Canaanites, their god Baal, was on the order of marital infidelity. Idolatry was a form of adultery. Israel was continually unfaithful in her marriage

commitment to the Lord, and the Lord, as the faithful Husband of the Covenant, suffered the pains of her repeated infidelities. God suffered these pains precisely because of His own continuing fidelity to Israel.

God commanded him, then, to go out and marry this whore named Gomer (1:3), a woman who would be unfaithful to him repeatedly. Hosea did so, and the rest of his life was filled with sadness and disappointment, as over and over again he forgave and took back his faithless wife. This, he said, was God's own experience with his Chosen People, constantly forgiving their repeated infidelities. He felt on his own pulse, as it were, the longing of God to bring Israel once again to the early desert days of the divine espousals, "as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt" (2:15).

Thus, Hosea, in the very circumstances of his marriage, was to embody God's experience of the Covenant and to know through the pains of his own soul the deep grief of the divine heart. This feature of Hosea's vocation marks him as one of the Bible's most special messengers, participating, even by the details of his prophetic life, in the very suffering of God, the mystery of our Blood-redemption on the Cross. "Who is wise?" asks Hosea; "Let him understand these things" (14:9)

Perhaps the most poignant scene in this very poignant book is found in chapter 3, where Hosea must go down to the slave market and, with great embarrassment amid a jeering crowd ("Chastity begins at home!"), buy back the mother of his children, who has fallen so low as to lose her freedom. The price of a slave is thirty shekels of silver (cf. Exodus 21:32; Leviticus 27:4; Matthew 26:15), but Hosea does not even have enough money to close the deal. He is obliged to "scrape together" the resources to make the purchase, throwing in some measures of barley from the family kitchen. Nonetheless, he does so, because he still loves this unworthy wife, and, like God, he is resolved to take her back once again. These few verses form one of the most moving scenes in the whole Bible.

This wife of Hosea bore him children, to whom he was directed to give very improbable names, names symbolic of Israel's sins (1:4-8). These children, born in such a miserable home, also experienced the dereliction that was being visited on Israel in that deranged and chaotic time of apostasy.

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