

“Not in My Name”

Proper 12C: Hosea 1:2-11 – St Peter’s Cathedral – 24 July 2016

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^{NRS} Hosea 1:1 The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel. ² When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." ³ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. ⁴ And the LORD said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel." ⁶ She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷ But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen." ⁸ When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God." ¹⁰ Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." ¹¹ The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

+ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Interpretive Imperative

If this text from Hosea was the not in our Scriptures, what it says would not matter. But it is, and so what it says does matter, and it matters a great deal.

This text, like all our sacred texts, made it into the Jewish and Christian Scripture because it proved its worth as a faithful witness to God and a gift of life to God’s people in their struggle to live an authentic faith in the midst of exile, displacement, and habitual failure.

There is therefore a moral responsibility to attend to the witness of Hosea, to *its* witness to this gift of life and faith. We are obliged to undertake responsible interpretation.

For fundamentalism, and its kin, religious violence, is a perennial problem of the human condition, and the scaffolding of fundamentalism is **the misuse of religious texts**. A

critical fact about any sacred text is that its meaning is not self-evident.¹ We must guard against literal, shallow and self-serving readings of our difficult texts otherwise we show we have learned nothing from history.

Hence the thoughtful interpretation of our sacred texts and the articulation of their life-giving theology is the most pressing task facing the church and God's people today. In fact, the more regularly we fail to preach these difficult texts, the more ground we cede to the fundamentalists. And worse still, the more we neglect these difficult texts in public worship, **the more we foster precisely the theological illiteracy and spiritual atrophy that rends the heart susceptible to undertaking violence in God's name.**

Because what is at stake is not the reputation of this particular text from Hosea, nor the reputation of our particular denomination. No, what is at stake is the very plausibility of belief in a God whom we profess is utterly and entirely for us, with us, beside us, whom we claim is inexhaustible love, whom we declare to be the creator and sustainer and redeemer of life itself. What is at stake no less is the very possibility of human and cosmic flourishing and wellbeing.

From this it follows that theologians, and no less rabbis² and imams, as in every generation, will be the most influential voices of the twenty first century, for better or, tragically, for worse.³

The Interpretive Dilemma

What I have presented thus far is the **interpretive imperative**. I now turn to what I call **the interpretive dilemma**.

The Scripture reading from Hosea employs a symbolic action that to modern⁴ ears is rightly perceived to be sexist, degrading, offensive and dangerous. Hosea is asked to marry a whore, and have children of whoredom, and to give these children degrading and offensive names, names that evoke bloodshed, unfaithfulness, and abandonment.⁵

Whether this symbolic action is metaphorical or not, we must offer a critique of this metaphor, this symbolism. Our interpretive responsibility means is that we must thwart any attempt to use this text – or any sacred text – to promote domestic violence, abuse

¹ I am not making a claim one way or the other about the perspecuity (or not) of Scripture. I am rather claiming that "hermeneutics goes all the way down" as James K. A. Smith puts it. Interpretation is always necessary, even in Paradise. See Anstey, M. P. 2007. "Habakkuk the faithful dissident: A performative hermeneutic for Anglicans in Australia," *St Mark's Review* 203 (2), 47–60.

² This sermon in fact is profoundly influenced by a book I wish every person on earth would read: *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, 2015, Hodder & Stoughton, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Sacks draws in part on the theories of René Girard, who is a significant shaper of my theological thinking. In a nutshell, the New Atheists claim religion gives rise to violence. Girard argues that violence gives rise to religion. I agree with Girard on this.

³ I would further argue, all Christians are theologians. Whether all Jews are rabbis or all Muslims are imams is a claim I am qualified neither to assert nor refute.

⁴ I leave aside the vexing question as to how "shocking" this would have been to ancient readers. If this is a reference to temple prostitution, it would have different connotations.

⁵ Jezreel refers to an incident of bloodshed (2 Kings 9-10), Lo-Ruhamah means "not compassion", and Lo-Ammi means "Not my people".

of spouse or children, inequality of the sexes, or the shame-inducing and humiliating use of people in public to make a religious point.

We must carefully observe, furthermore, that nothing in the text suggests that the people of God should emulate Hosea; there is no exhortation for the reader to enact this metaphor. For anyone to do so in any form is without justification.

This troubling and difficult metaphor is the interpretive dilemma we must face.⁶

But our task as hearers of this word is not done if *all* we do is reject the misuse of this Scripture. Because this metaphor in fact conveys a religious truth of the utmost importance and urgency.

The Interpretive Confrontation

This text, without warning, disrupts our settled patterns of worship and faith by saying, **God's people are capable of living in such a way that God says, "No. Not in my name."**

The disruptive, offensive and shocking metaphor of Hosea is the prophet's way of revealing that which otherwise would be not be seen or noticed, articulated or confronted.⁷ And the staggering disclosure is that there are times when the actions of God's people must be named as evil, as an inexcusable moral failure, as diametrically opposed to all that is of God.

There are times when those who say God is on their side **are in fact en route to death.**

*Anyone who watched the 7:30 Report last Monday will know this to be true in their bones.*⁸

Anyone who saw the bus driven "in God's name" plough into hundreds of people in Nice will know this to be true in their bones.

*Anyone who saw the Paris bombings done "in God's name" will know this to be true in their bones.*⁹

And it is precisely the idea that God at best ignores or at worse sanctions such acts that must be addressed and adjudicated in the context of our public worship.

And so we declare, "No. Not in God's name".

⁶ Let me make two more important points: first, the division of the text into lectionary readings can lead in itself to an *irresponsible* interpretive strategy, when the absence of the wider context leads to misreading. The entire text of Hosea (and beyond) needs to be considered. Secondly, I acknowledge that for some readers, the incommensurability of hearing both the troubling symbolic language and a redemptive life-giving word from the same text is acute.

⁷ A point made repeatedly in the works of Brueggemann, often in relation to political powers whose purposes are served by maintaining the silence (and hence the status quo).

⁸ The ABC 7:30 Report on Monday 18 July 2016 reported on the widespread sexual abuse by clergy and others in the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle and the allegations of its cover-up. These matters will be investigated by the Royal Commission commencing 2 August 2016.

⁹ The scare quotes "in God's name" of course is to indicate that this is what is claimed. This claim is precisely the one we must refute, in public worship, not simply in private conversation.

It is vital moreover to acknowledge that our capacity to exercise this moral and theological judgment is made possible by the reality of God's judgment, as seen in this text and many other texts.¹⁰ For if God is forever turning a blind eye, if God is unable to cast judgment, if God is incapable of drawing a line in the sand, then we lose all capacity to do likewise.

The moral cohesion of the universe and the theological legitimacy of the faith of the God of Abraham depends on the responsibility of God (and thus us who are made in God's image) to name that which is not God, to name that which brings death, even and especially when it claims to have God's blessing and approval.

The Interpretive Gift

I began with the **interpretive imperative**, which led us to attend to the **interpretive dilemma** of this ghastly symbolism, a symbolism whose capacity for oppressive ideology and practice we must reject.

Yet nevertheless, this Scripture cannot be so silenced: for the **interpretive disruption** of this text exposes the self-deception whereby we convince ourselves that God sanctions religious violence, whatever invidious form it takes.

And so we come to our final reflection, the **interpretive gift** of this text. For in this sacred text is not only the judgment of our failure and shortcoming, but the formidable and evocative vision of an alternative future that God intends, a future where religious violence is no more.¹¹

In the very same place where God declares "Not in my name", God declares restoration.

God alone is the One who says, "Israel is my beloved."¹²

God alone is the One who then say "There is death in Israel."

And God alone is the One who finally declares, as in the final verse (v. 11):

"the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.'"¹³

In all times and in all places where God's judgment is announced, it is entirely and unequivocally also a declaration of God's love and grace.

¹⁰ The world, in fact, begins in judgment: "And God saw all that God had made and it was very good" (!).

¹¹ For God's world is a world in which "the one who is not in my image is nonetheless in God's image" (Sacks).

¹² Taking "Israel" in the sense of "the people of God".

¹³ And this, if we consider it carefully, is the most startling form of grace. The grace of God is the establishment of a universe in which the lives and decisions of human beings, made in God's image, have ultimate significance. For it is this moral coherence that means we can depend on the constant nurturing love of a parent to truly bring wellbeing and life to the child. And you can't have this without the flip side. What is prophets of Ancient Israel assert over and over is that there is a "threshold" of darkness beyond which the consequences will not be averted even by repentance. It is not that any particular sin is unpardonable, it is that the consequences of sin can accumulate to such a degree that they cannot be undone.

Surely this is the Easter reality.

No matter how much we find the prophetic text of Hosea disturbing, disruptive, and distressing, a world without such texts is far darker. For to imagine a world without such texts of judgment and restoration, is to imagine a world without cross and resurrection.

This is why we find ourselves, 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.

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." Amen.