

## Mother God - Reflection

*Hosea 11:1-11*

*Colossians 3:1-11*

*Luke 12:13-21*

It's very easy to see the prophetic books as being about doom and gloom, threats for the future, and a harsh, judgemental God. They can be the sorts of books that lead people to viewing the Hebrew Scriptures being about judgement, and conversely, the New Testament being about grace. However, as is often the case, there is more to the story than this somewhat simplistic reduction.

Before we dive into our reading from Hosea, I am going to give a little background that I think is helpful. One of the problems we, in our culture, have with much of the prophetic (and, indeed, other biblical writing too) is that our word "prophet" conflates two different ideas, which for the ancient Hebrews there were separate words. All too often, we think about prophecy as "foretelling the future," which is not helped by the apocalyptic stories being confused with prophecy. However, the Hebrew Scriptures condemn any form of foretelling the future, for the simple reason is that it shows a lack of trust in God.

What the prophets did do – and a different Hebrew word is used here – is to interpret the times. In the same ways that advocates and activists today call our government to account for the mistreatment in contemporary society, so too did the prophets call the rulers of their day to account for the times their society wandered off from God's call to treat the vulnerable with special compassion. And so, we get to Hosea, and the two excerpts we heard last week and this.

In last week's reading, we heard of Hosea's marriage to a woman who had been a prostitute. This was not something that women did out of choice. Typically women became prostitutes because they had no source of income. Their society had forgotten the precept to care for the vulnerable, including widows and orphans. If they had no male family member and their society forgot this injunction, they had few other choices. This was true for even the cultic prostitutes or other religions at the time, though they may have also been pressured into prostitution by male family members. So, although at the time society condemned Gomer, the wife of Hosea, for having been a prostitute, we can have compassion on her.

In that same reading, we also hear of the birth of the children, with terrible names. Imagine what it would be like as a child to be called "No compassion" or "not my people." By any standard that would be a bit rough on the kids. What sort of a father is this!

Before we look at today's reading, it is worth briefly talking about what comes in between as we leap from chapters 1 to 11. The "not" is removed from the children's names – almost straight away there is a promise of a future, and the children become "compassion" and "my people." However, there is also much condemnation of Israel, albeit using Gomer, the wife, as a metaphor.

In today's reading the imagery dramatically changes. It is no longer that of Yahweh as the husband and Israel as the adulterous wife. Now Yahweh is the parent and

Israel the rebellious child; and here we have the image of God as mother. According to Deuteronomy, there was a way of dealing with a rebellious son:

"If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear and be afraid.

Harsh punishment indeed and a metaphor for what had been described in the preceding chapters, albeit with the image of the adulterous wife. The wronged husband becomes the grieving mother:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.

God, the mother, has nurtured her infant child. Why am I saying, "God the mother"? Besides this was an era when men had little to do with small children; we have the image of the child raised to the cheek – and that is not her face. So here is a woman who has compassion on her child, whose life is threatened. There has to be another way – destruction cannot be the final word.

In our day, we are well aware of what domestic and family violence is, and how it impacts on all the people in the family – not just the person to whom the violence is being directed. The first imagery of God is deeply problematic because of this understanding.

So how do we reconcile these two very different images of God? Do we have one image as a stronger image than the other? Do we acknowledge the writers were humans with their very human limitations – including limited knowledge – at the time? Do we simply ignore the domestic and family violence implied in the imagery of God as husband?

You probably all know me well enough to know that I would never advocate for that last option, but I do think the first two can be used together. The challenge in today's readings is to hear these other images of God that have for so long been ignored.

What does the image of God as the caring mother of a young child teach us about ourselves? What does it teach us about how we relate to others?