

There is a story dating back to the Napoleonic wars. A young officer had been condemned to death for cowardice in the face of the enemy and was due to be shot the next day. The young man's mother came to make one desperate plea for her son's life to the Emperor himself, asking for mercy. Napoleon listened to her plea and simply replied, 'Madame, your son does not deserve mercy.' To which the woman replied, 'Sir, if he deserved mercy it would not be mercy.'

It is a story that has always appealed to me – it underlines for me the extravagance of mercy, the sheer graciousness of mercy, to the point of going beyond what is just. This came to my mind as I read our Lesson from Hosea and the psalm appointed for today.

In recent weeks, in our readings appointed from Amos and Hosea, the so called minor prophets operating in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century BC, can make for uncomfortable hearing; containing as they do words of judgement, words that speak of the consequences of judgement, a return to slavery as the prophet speaks of God turning his back on his people. Reading these passages, we can all too easily come to the conclusion that these are angry men, motivated by a rage against those to whom they are speaking. Our reading from Hosea this morning provides a more complete picture.

The opening verses speak of God's love for wayward Israel in terms of a mother's love. You sense a heartache as the prophet articulates God's pain as he watches the inevitable consequences of their disobedience. The passage speaks of a love that loves through all rejection, despite all disobedience, that never ends.

Our Psalm opens with the words:

- 1 O give thanks to the Lord, for | he is | gracious, ♦
for his steadfast | love en|dures for | ever.

‘Steadfast love’ translates a Hebrew word *chesed*. It is also translated as mercy, as loving kindness.

In the context of the Old Testament it is a word associated with Covenant, Covenant between God and his people Israel and loyalty to that Covenant. It speaks particularly of God’s loving kindness in condescending to the needs of his creation – we see many expressions of this in the Psalms; a particularly striking example of this is to be found in Psalm 136 (*page 751, BCP 2004*) There is a progression from an acknowledgement of God’s greatness, through his acts of creation, of the redemption of the people from slavery in Egypt, their entry into the land and their preservation in the face of their enemies, in each verse recalling

‘for his mercy endures for ever’

At all stages in the story of creation, of redemption, God’s mercy, God’s *chesed* endures for ever.

Our reading from Hosea, seen in the light of God’s *chesed*, is not the story of an indulgent God but a faithful God. Israel may forget, may disobey, may abandon but God will never forget, is always ready to respond, one whose ultimate purpose is redemption.

Moving from the Old Covenant to the New, we can see the Incarnation, God coming among us in the person of Jesus in terms of God’s *chesed*, God’s steadfast love. The love outlined for us in the passage from Hosea is love given to the ungrateful, the undeserving. It is love thrown back on the lover and yet the lover continues to love. This is what we see in the mystery of the Incarnation, God among us in the person of Jesus. As we read each Christmas Day:

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

John 1:10-12

But *chesed* love is covenant love and there are two parties to the covenant. Love may be rejected or ignored and love may be received; love received has the power to change the beloved. The writer of the Letter to the Colossians, in the passage we read this morning, in language reminiscent of baptism, talks of dying, of life hidden with Christ, of being raised with Christ, of stripping off the old self, of putting on the new. Lives that have been captivated by the love of the Lover are called to incarnate something of that love in the world in which we live; the love that turns the other cheek, that goes the second mile, that surrenders the second coat.

¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. *1 John 4:10-11*

This is love, this is *chesed* love, steadfast love. This is the love of the Eternal Lover, that has the power to change even me.

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:5-8*