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On Being God's People (Hosea 2.14-20)

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We embark on the season of Lent – six-weeks of intentional preparation for Easter – with a reading that touches into the perennial conviction of Jewish and Christian faith. In a nutshell, it's this.

God desires relationship with humankind. God desires intimacy, reciprocity, communion with us, such that we and all the world may truly flourish. We, on the other hand, are inclined to forget where our good really lies. We want and then don't want this intimacy, this connection to the living God; we say yes, then renege on our commitment to live accordingly. Depending on the biblical text and its metaphorical framework, human beings are thus variously described in Scripture as 'disobedient', 'unfaithful', 'blind' or 'sinful'. And yet, so tradition testifies, whatever we do, God remains faithful; God seeks us out and wants us back ... that's the nature of divine life. 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness, O God', proclaims that great text of repentance, the book of Lamentations (Lam.3.22-23).

In the 8th century BCE, one of the so-called minor prophets of Israel expressed this perennial conviction in imagery that even now is startling in its daring. Israel, as you know, understood itself to have a special vocation to respond to and realise this relationship with God, that God desires with all people. But in the days when the 'word of the Lord' came to Hosea, Israel was running off with other gods – the Canaanite Baal or Baals. The prophet, therefore, accuses his people of having 'played the whore'. And in his passionate reproach, he expresses his sense of 'Israel's infidelity' in terms of a love triangle – 'between husband (YHWH), lover (Baal), and wife (Israel)'.¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.215.

In the verses immediately before the passage we heard, YHWH [the Lord] is portrayed, then, as a wounded lover, threatening his unfaithful wife [Israel] with exposure, punishment and an end to their relationship once and for all. 'I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says the Lord' (Hosea 2.13). But then, astonishingly (and faster than most wounded lovers, I must say), the Lord is portrayed as relenting. 'I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope'. Says biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, in this text 'the wounded and forsaken husband YHWH "re-woos" Israel and remarries her, a new marriage that causes the earth to flourish again'.² For, in the prophet's imagination, Israel's renewed relationship with God, enables her renewed relationship with the earth: 'I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground: and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety'.

I know all this marital imagery may be a bit affronting – with its unquestioningly heterosexual and patriarchal assumptions. But stick with the primary symbolism – the extraordinary image of intimacy between God and God's people, and the sense that renewal of this intimacy is internally connected to the flourishing and peace of the earth. Lent is the season where we respond to this invitation to ever-deepening intimacy and bond ... and aren't we more than ever aware of what happens in the world when we reject relationship with the real ground of our being, when we and others forsake the One who truly desires our good, and follow instead after false gods, gods of war, power and greed, insatiable for sacrifice?

So there's an aspect of this invitation to return to God that's addressed to each of us, personally, individually. A question is posed to me: Where am I withholding myself, living divided, dallying with other lovers (so to speak)? How, in

² Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.215.

my prayer and my way of life, might I let myself be drawn closer and entrust myself more whole-heartedly to the steadfast and transfiguring love of God? But there's also an aspect of this invitation that's addressed to us corporately, communally. The prophet Hosea is not talking to individual God-seekers one by one about their personal fidelity to the spiritual life, but to a people – the people of Israel – whom God has called into being and whose common life is supposed to participate in and make manifest God's justice and mercy. This Lent, it's this corporate or communal dimension of the life of faith that I'd like to focus on.

And this for two reasons. The first is that, in the words of Pope Francis, 'no one is saved alone. Isolation is not part of our faith. God attracts us within a complex web of relationships ...',³ and apart from these relationships we cannot grow, we cannot love, we cannot realise God's life in ours. 'If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?' These words are attributed to Basil of Caesarea in the 4th century, who was passionate about common life as the only place people could truly grow to maturity in faith and beyond the prison of spiritual egotism. 'Without others, how do we grow in humility and patience, in solidarity and respect? Without others with whom we share life, how will we learn to embrace practical service to our neighbour? How do we learn to become a living body unless we have opportunity to serve and depend on one another in these small, everyday ways?'⁴

The second reason for focusing on the corporate dimension of our faith is that it's only as we become 'a people', a body, a community, that we actually witness to the possibilities of the new sociality, the new kind of humanity that God desires for all. God attracts us within a complex web of relationships, writes Pope Francis, 'and sends us out into the middle of the cross-roads of history'. 'The People of God', he goes on, 'is a community within the broader community of a nation' and if the church 'has a particular role to play at times of crisis, it is precisely to remind the

³ Pope Francis in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p.104.

⁴ Ben Sternke, 'Whose feet will you wash?' Blogpost, *Field notes on life and mission with God in post-Christendom*, December 8, 2009, <https://bensternke.com/whose-feet-will-you-wash/>

people of its soul, of its need to respect the common good'.⁵ In a similar vein, Buddhist practitioner and author Meg Wheatley speaks of the necessity of creating 'islands of sanity' in a 'destructive sea', places and communities where we can remember who we are and 'get good work done'.

That's why the corporate dimension of our spiritual life matters. And I wonder, what this suggests for us, here at Benedictus? How do we and how might we relate to ourselves as 'a people', a microcosm of the whole people of God, a web of relationships in which we each of us is personally honoured and cared for, and which is also attentive to the vocation we share to enable the good of the people and the world around us?

For some time now, we have been drawing on the image of a waterhole to express something of what Benedictus is and is called to be. A waterhole is a rich eco-system in its own right, where many different forms of life and webs of connection make up the flourishing of the whole. It's a place of refreshment to which creatures may come from near and far, and then go on to other places replenished; and it's an ecology whose very existence helps regulate the temperature of the land around and is a sign of life. And I wonder – how do you relate to this image? How do you see yourself in connection with it and with others you encounter here?

Over the next few weeks, I'm delighted to say, we're going to be finding out a bit more about what's happening at the waterhole: about who is here with us – among us; about the inflows and outflows, the givings and receivings and possibilities for life that are present already in the ecology of our common life. I've invited a few different members of our community to share something of themselves and their relationship to Benedictus on coming Saturdays, and later in Lent we're planning Community Days (one via Zoom and one on site at St Ninian's) to allow more of us to share our stories and get to know one another better, to explore what it means for us to share a common life and play our various parts in enabling God's justice and love. I very much hope that you will want to be part of these conversations, that you

⁵ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, pp.104-105.

will enjoy to connect more deeply with each other and discover your place, your part in the whole.

Lent, I said, is the season where we respond to God's invitation to ever-deepening intimacy with the real source of our being ... with God, with others and with ourselves. In the face of the crises of our world, where else can we start but here?