

23 July 2022

Embodying the Word (Hosea 1. 2-10)

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We've been exploring the notion of a 'prophetic vocation' in light of the tradition of biblical prophecy. Over the past two weeks, we've focused on the prophet Amos who was active in the 8th century BCE. Today, we hear from a second prophet who was active around the same time. Like Amos, Hosea is considered one of the Twelve Minor Prophets and he too is called to proclaim the word of the Lord at a time when God's people were divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Hosea's words were originally addressed to the northerners – to the religious and political crisis of the last days of the northern kingdom. But after its conquest by Assyria in 721BCE, Hosea's proclamation was deemed equally pertinent to the situation in Judah.¹ For in both cases, God's chosen people were inclined to wander away from true worship and to live careless of injustice and oppression – in other words, to break faith with God and with God's law.

The prophet, therefore, proclaims the Lord's indictment against his own people. 'There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing' (Hosea 4. 1-3). It's a lament for broken relationship that sounds uncannily contemporary.

But how do words like this make a difference? It's one thing for prophets like Hosea and Amos, and Micah, Isaiah, Habbakuk and the rest to 'hear the word of the Lord' and (however reluctantly) to consent to speak it aloud. It's quite another thing to awaken hearing in others, for God's word actually to *be heard* such that a people's

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.216.

behaviour is changed. And this brings us to the question of the effectiveness of prophetic speech, and what it takes for a prophet to act in the world so as to communicate God.

Last week, we noted Amos's warning that there may come a time of 'famine ... of hearing the words of the Lord' (Amos 8.11). Theologically, I think we must say that God never ceases to speak – God is eternally self-communicating, self-sharing. But sometimes the people being addressed are chronically inattentive or resistant. And sometimes a culture can be so corrupted or trivialised that it lacks the capacity to convey God's meaning. As when rituals become mechanical, language goes dead or cliched, and symbols are disconnected from lived experience. In his prison letters, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the startling view that in his day the words of Christian proclamation had lost their force; the church, he said, had become incapable of uttering the Word of God such that the world could be changed and renewed by it.² And perhaps you know something of this experience – this felt sense of lacking a language to communicate the depth of meaning you encounter in prayer, in the life of faith. So prophets need always to find living ways of communicating God, speaking truth. And here, I think, the witness of the biblical prophets offers two profound insights.

The first concerns the necessity of imagination. According to Walter Brueggemann, that the 'task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us'.³ And this evoking of an 'alternative consciousness', an alternative way of seeing and being, is necessarily a creative endeavour. 'It is the vocation of the prophet' says Brueggemann, 'to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one [that seems to be] the only thinkable one'.⁴ Here we see the significance of visions,

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, intro. Samuel Wells (an abridged edition) (London: SCM Press, 2017), p.105.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), p.3.

⁴ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.40.

images, metaphors and symbolic acts in prophetic speech. These help us see what's in front of us in a new light, and offer resources for renewing or reimagining the future.

Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has written similarly that 'God needs prophets in order to make himself known, and all prophets are necessarily artistic'.⁵ Think of the poetry of the prophet Isaiah whose imagery of swords being beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and of the lion lying down with the lamb, are still some of the most evocative images of peace-making we have. Or of Amos's vision of abundant justice, rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5.24). Or the huge range of symbolic actions by which prophets sought to enact, or 'perform' God's word in such a way as to waken people from slumber, from resignation to a corrupt status quo – Jeremiah breaking the potter's vessel (Jer. 19.10); Jesus overturning the tables in the temple; Extinction Rebellion staging 'die-ins' in public places to confront us with the real consequences of global heating. These words and deeds are profound acts of the imagination that seek, in Brueggeman's words, 'to bring to public expression the very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long, and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there'.⁶ Little wonder, as Iris Murdoch said, that totalitarian (and perhaps also managerial) regimes always want to suppress the artists.

The second thing we learn from the tradition of biblical prophecy is that the word of the Lord must be embodied in the lives of those who would share it. The true prophet does not pass on divine communication from a safe distance, but is radically vulnerable to the anguish of unreconciled reality and to the travail of its movement towards healing. Jeanette Mathews says that prophets were 'not merely channels ... but embodied communicators'. She points to 'Habbakuk's visceral response to a vision of God ... "my belly is in turmoil ... my lips tingle, decay comes into my bones (Hab 3.16)', and to Ezekiel 'asked to eat the scroll on which the

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar cited in Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1989), p.4.

⁶ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.65.

message for the house of Israel was written (Ezek 2.9-3.3).⁷ And of all of them, none is more personally drawn into embodying the anguish of the word they must speak than Hosea.

‘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’ (Hos 1.2). Of course, there’s a feminist critique to be made here about the problematic implications of a tradition that envisages unfaithful Israel as an unfaithful wife. But for now, I invite you to set those concerns to one side and notice the focus of the text itself. For what God is asking of the prophet is that he enter radically into the hurt of the world and indeed into God’s own ‘hurt’. If Hosea is to communicate the depth of Israel’s betrayal and its consequences, then he must know it in his own being. He too must undergo the pain of an unfaithful relationship – not just imaginatively, but as a lived experience. He too must bring into the world children deprived of connection with God, as the children of Israel are depriving themselves of connection with God. He must know God’s parental grief from the inside.

Hosea’s first born son is thus named ‘Jezreel’ which alludes to the massacre at Jezreel and the subsequent downfall of the northern kingdom;⁸ his daughter is Lo-ruhamah, meaning ‘Not pitied’ ‘for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel’, says the Lord; and another son is name, ‘Lo-ammi’, meaning ‘Not my people’, for, the Lord goes on, ‘you are not my people and I am not your God’ (Hosea 1.9).

Commentator Grace Emmerson writes: ‘Hosea’s words of judgement convey ... a poignant statement of Israel’s self-exclusion from the relationship. The whole passage is a remarkable interweaving of the public and the private in its proclamation... of the Lord’s word by means of the prophet’s personal domestic circumstances’.⁹ Walter Brueggemann has spoken of how this ‘internalization of

⁷ Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), p.67.

⁸ Grace I. Emmerson, ‘Hosea’ in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), p.676.

⁹ Emmerson, ‘Hosea’, p.677.

hurt', this 'embodied anguish' is part of the radical prophetic tradition which brings to experience and expression that which has been suppressed or denied.¹⁰

How does the word of God penetrate human culture so as to renew and transform it? The prophets of Israel show us the necessity of imagination, as do the poets, visionaries and artists of every culture. *And* they show us the necessity of embodiment, of 'becoming the word you hear'. Without internalising or embodying God's word, the prophet's words will lack authority – be a 'second-hand' communication rather than living, felt knowledge. Furthermore, says Brueggemann, without the vulnerability of embodiment the 'prophetic imagination will likely be as strident and as destructive as that which it criticizes'; for 'effective prophetic criticism is done not by an outsider, but always by one who must embrace the grief, enter into the death, and know the pain of the criticized one'.¹¹ And here's the real paradox: only this embodied knowledge that embraces the grief can simultaneously perceive the hope, the inextinguishable possibility that constitutes the world – which is the ever-renewing, ever-recreating word of the Lord. Or as Hosea perceived it in the astonishing reversal we heard at the end of our reading, '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"' (Hosea 1.10).

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.90.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.99.