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God's love for Israel

11 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

² But the more they were called, the more they went away from me.

They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.

³ It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them.

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.

To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

⁵ 'Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?

⁶ A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans.

⁷ My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.

⁸ 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.

⁹ I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man – the Holy One among you.

I will not come against their cities.

¹⁰ They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion.

When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.

¹¹ They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves.

I will settle them in their homes,' declares the LORD.

The silhouette of father and toddler makes a lovely image. It evokes parental feelings of responsibility and protectiveness for the little person at your side who has placed a trusting hand in yours. We remember the delight that our child is now ready to venture outside without being wheeled or carried, our admiration for his achievement and the encouragement we gave when the little one falters or grows weary. And we recall the pleasurable anticipation of walks together when the toddler grows through childhood and becomes an adult.

So when, through the prophet Hosea, God speaks of his relationship to his own people Israel, he chose imagery that is powerful and meaningful to anyone who has had children in their care. We are left in no doubt that God truly loves his people, just as any caring parent loves their children:

When Israel was a child, I loved him (v1)
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms (v3)
I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love
To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek,
and I bent down to feed them (v4)

But later we read of the estrangement that has come between parent God and child Israel:

My people are determined to turn from me (v7)

As parents we can understand the anger and hurt that God feels: we have probably experienced moments when growing children rebelled. Sadly this can sometimes lead to a lasting breakdown in the relationship but more often these times pass and in years to come, parent and child can look back at those times with a mixture of embarrassment and amusement – provided we have become reconciled. Parental love should be able to forgive and endure. If that is true of us as fallible human parents, how much more is it true of the love of our Heavenly Father?

Hosea was writing at about 750 BC at a time of political and moral chaos in Israel. The thrust of his prophetic writing was to attribute the nation's very serious problems to a fundamental failure in its relationship with God. The people were turning away from God, flirting with the cult of Baal and abandoning the God-given precepts set down after they were rescued from captivity in Egypt.

Despite all the hurt God felt at the nation's rebellion against his authority, as a loving parent he looked beyond the truculent and disobedient child, and knew he could not abandon them:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?
.....all my compassion is aroused (v8)

If you read the whole of Hosea you will see how the tragedy of the prophet's own dysfunctional family is used to interpret the nation's problems and their fractured relationship with God. Against that background today's passage reveals the full extent of God's love and forgiveness for his people, despite that their errors and rebellion. Many centuries later Jesus used the Parable of the Lost Son to make this same point.

And then at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry something more powerful than either prophecy or parable happened when God showed the full extent of his love for all of mankind:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

May that truth sustain and strengthen us as we go about our daily life today.

The next S.P.A.C.E. reflection will be posted on Ash Wednesday, February 17th

For prayerful reflection... a traditional psalm and a modern hymn

Psalm 103

¹ Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
² Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits –
³ who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
⁴ who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the
eagle's.
⁶ The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.
⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:
⁸ the LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbour his anger for ever;
¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the
earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions
from us.

¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who
fear him;
¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's
children –
¹⁸ with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.
¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in
heaven,
and his kingdom rules over all.
²⁰ Praise the LORD, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
²¹ Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
²² Praise the LORD, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the LORD, my soul.

How deep the Father's love for us

1. How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory

2. Behold the man upon the cross
My sin upon His shoulders Ashamed,
I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished

3. I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom

Stuart Townend (b1963)

