

Grace Lutheran Community, 28th July, 2019: 7th after Pentecost (Proper 12C)

And 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

One of the questions that is often asked of a person after they have been away on holidays is: "Did you have a good holiday?" We have been away on holiday, and we *did* have a *good* holiday. Part of this break involved a few days in Christchurch, New Zealand. This was very fascinating.

Some eight years ago (22 February 2011 at 12:51 p.m. local time) Christchurch and the Canterbury Region experienced a 6.3 magnitude earthquake that devastated Christchurch. 185 people died as a result of this earthquake, together with massive devastation. Also, earlier this year (15 March, 2019) a right-wing extremist shot many people and killed 51 people. Some have asked how has Christchurch recovered from this, and I cannot speak regarding the shooting (as we did not have any detailed conversations with people about this). However, in terms of recovery from the earth quake, the rebuilding work is amazing. It is multi-levelled in terms of identifying areas to build and not rebuild (resulting in extra parks in City precinct), as also the considered pace of rebuilding as to not artificially inflate or overheat the economy.

As a church person I was also interested in the significant Church buildings that had been affected. In the middle of Christchurch was the Anglican Cathedral. On the edge of the City environs is the Roman Catholic Church. Both suffered extensive damage. Fascinatingly, the Anglicans have constructed what is affectionately known as the 'Cardboard Cathedral'. People are still gathering together in worship. And this, together with being able to worship in several different congregations made me again think about an important question for us all: "What does it mean to 'be' 'church'?"

Please note: the question is not 'What does it mean to be 'a' 'church' (that is, a 'local congregation'?) Rather, the question is 'what does it mean to 'be' church'? This is really a question of our 'spiritual identity'. The 'question of 'being' is important to all of us.

When we are born in this world, part of our journey of life is becoming aware of our own 'identity'. Simply put (but variously asked and expressed in many ways) is the question, "Who *am* I?" This question is pondered in different ways in different stages of life.

The question of 'being' (Who am I?) is related to the question of 'doing' ('How shall I live? What is important to me? How shall I interact with other? Etc...'). And sometimes the question of 'being' is seen in what we 'do'.

There is a fascinating debate about the Christchurch Cathedral. There is a substantial gap between the Insurance received and actual cost of rebuilding a church building affected by the earthquake. If they were allowed to actually demolish the building and build a totally new structure, they would have more than sufficient funds. But many people who are not members of the Church have argued that the Church Building is a civic building and must be reconstructed as it was.

What does it mean to 'be' 'church' (that is, 'body' of 'Christ')? This is a question we consider every week when we gather in worship and hear God's Word (as we also read His word in devotion, and seek to live as God's people in this world). When we come to the First Reading from today from Hosea (Hosea 1:2-10) we have an opportunity for a fascinating reflection on what it means to 'be' church.

First of all, we note that Hosea prophesied in an interesting time in Israel's (that is, the 'Northern Kingdom's) history. Hosea was a prophet from around 750 to 720 B.C. and concluded his work before the Assyrian conquest of Israel. At this time 'Israel' was quite materially prosperous. But they had become spiritually weak. It is into this context that somehow God called Hosea to do something quite radical.

There are many elements of Hosea the prophet that are problematic for us today. And this is simply because we know very little about Hosea the person. But he records that He was called to marry who had a troubled sexual history (and we could ponder what this means at multiple levels. Had Hosea himself lived a 'colourful life' in his early years? What of Gomer's background – had she had a troubled family upbringing?) And they had three children over a number of years who were given very interesting names (and today some would question the giving of these names. But maybe they also had a 'common name' as well as a 'legal name'...).

The children's names were Jezreel (meaning 'God will disperse'). This is actually a reflection 1 Kings 21 and Naboth's vineyard in the town of Jezreel, When Naboth refused to sell his vineyard to Ahab, Queen Jezebel had Naboth killed—resulting in a severe judgment by the Lord (1 Kings 21). Soon after (we are not told how long between the first two children) a daughter is born named 'Lo-ruhama', meaning "not having obtained mercy". And some time after (this is the reference to 'weaning' a son is born named 'Lo-ammi' "not My people".

One commentator, reflecting on the names and time transition of each child, has pointed to what can be a '3 stage' cycle of 'drift' away from God.

First, we rely on our own 'strength'. We may even promote what we see as good religious works. But it is about human strength and human achievement.

Paradoxically (and yet logically) we can become 'weak' spiritually. Again, this can even include what appears like 'worship', but that which is condemned by God. How often did God say that people worshipped with their lips, but not in their hearts? God also spoke of how people would offer what looked like fine acts of worship, but as soon as worship was over considered how they could take advantage of people.

Finally, this leads from a 'distance' from God ("not My people"). People themselves may think they are 'being' God's people; but God Himself says "You are not My people".

Now interesting in this journey after the children are born to Hosea and Gomer is that Gomer seems to leave Hosea to 'go back' to an 'old way of life'. And then God called Hosea to seek her out (hence why some have seen this as a great 'love story'). Hosea says, "The LORD said to me, "Go. Show your love to your wife again. She is loved by another man. And she has committed adultery. But I want you to love her just as I love the people of Israel." Hosea 3:1.

What does it mean to 'be' church'? It is living in the presence of God, and the knowledge of His eternal love for us.

Many years after Hosea, the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians at Rome. Amongst his words are those that actually draw from Hosea's experience. We read in Romans 11:25-27: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; He will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins.' Romans 11:25-27 (cf. Romans 9:22-33 where God speaks of this partial 'hardening' of hearts so that 'Gentile' may also be brought into the 'family of God').

What does it mean to 'be' church? It is living in the knowledge and presence of the love of God, who seeks us out. This never excuses sin (and sinful actions). But we always have God's love, even if we do not rightfully live in the light of that love.

We also heard today (Colossians 3:13-14): "You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for He forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross."

Our Lord God says, "And 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'." It takes courage to care for another person when everyone else has given up on them, but you don't.

Life can throw us many challenges, externally... We also know that we fail to live as God's redeemed and holy people. This is our nature.

'Being church' means recognising we are part of a 'greater whole' and are not to live individualistic lives apart from God and His people (although it won't mean we will not have troubled moments, just as Hosea and Gomer had).

'Being church' means acknowledging your sin and your sinful nature, but also remembering the Redemption you have in Christ (just as Hosea sought out his troubled wife).

The point of the story of Hosea and Gomer is how God operates within our own lives. God bought us just like Hosea bought Gomer. Because of the Cross of Christ we are assured that God's love for us, is just as unconditional as was Hosea's love was for Gomer. How in the words of the Apostle Paul that "there is truly nothing that can separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus"- Romans 8:39.

Our faith is in the God who never gives up on us. Hosea assures us that God remains active in the search for all people and that that His love will ultimately prevail. In the midst of pain there is always hope. May that hope remain for us our guiding principle as we live our lives as people who have been created and loved by God. Amen.