

Marriage made in Heaven

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[0 : 00] On Wednesday the 15th of April 2009, I commenced ministry here at St Paul's as your rector. There was a special commencement of ministry service here in this building on that evening.

And for most of you at St Paul's, it was the first time that you had seen Natalie or I in the flesh. Some things are particularly memorable for me on that evening, especially the comment from one parishioner that my wife looked hot.

Imagine if at that service your first glimpse of your new rector's wife was in fact more flesh than you had anticipated.

You can't help but noticing that she's wearing a rather risqué miniskirt, inappropriate for Chatswood Mall, let alone church, especially on such an occasion with all ages of dignitaries gathered.

You try to put first impressions out of your mind, but it's hard not to notice that maybe the heels are a bit too high, the neckline's a bit too low, and the make-up is overdone.

[1 : 15] Your mind starts to make assessments and judgements, and you can't wait for the issue to be raised afterwards over tea to see what other people think. After the formal bits of the service is over, and the less formal welcome begins, a real clangor is dropped in the hope of getting to know the new rector and his wife a little more.

The MC asks the wife, so what is it that you do? At that moment, the new rector shuffles, and he coughs and mentions something about how glad they are to be here and looking forward to ministry beginning, but there is not so much as even a blush as she says into the microphone, I'm into prostitution actually.

There is an audible gasp. Someone laughs thinking it's a joke, and then it's a deafening silence. She wasn't joking.

So the MC is wondering, what do I do now? Throw to the floor for further questions? Sing a hymn? Go to confession? Maybe close with prayer?

Instead, he nervously blurts out, well, at least you've got three great kids. A couple of people nervously laugh with the MC, but then the new rector says, holding back tears, well, the first one's mine, but the other two you'll need to ask my wife.

[2 : 41] I'm not sure who the fathers of those two are. Now it's time really to serve the tea and coffee. Some go into damage control, hoping that it won't leak into the media.

Others take the opportunity to express they were never in favour of this appointment in the first place. Others are wondering just how much he charges per hour. But the wardens pull the new rector aside and ask him, are you okay?

Have you lost your faith? How did you end up with a prostitute? And his answer is unbelievable. God told me to go to King's Cross and to marry her.

It is his way of getting across his message to his people that their faithlessness to him is no trivial matter and it breaks his heart. But it's also a reminder as they see his children that God is going to take this stuff seriously and he will judge them.

And also a reminder as they see me walk in pain day by day that he remains faithful to his people. This is the shocking scenario that we're introduced to at the beginning of Hosea.

[3 : 59] The account of Hosea's family life is not made up illustration. This is not a parable. He is a real man who lived in real time at a real place in history.

This before us is enacted prophecy through the family life of Hosea. It is Hosea's personal history being worked out and ordered by God to speak to his people in all of its bluntness and its rawness. We can see from verse one when all this took place the word of the Lord came to Hosea son of Beri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah kings of Judah.

That's the two tribes of the south the original 12 tribes before they split in two. And during the reign of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel Israel is the ten tribes of the north.

And so we can work out from this list of kings that Hosea was active in the 8th century BC and that he lived and prophesied to the ten northern tribes called Israel.

[5 : 10] It was a time of growing affluence and relative peace from preoccupied neighbours. The grim Mesopotamian war machine Assyria which was just the north of the borders of Israel had begun to falter under threats from their own enemies around but also from internal disunity.

But with Israel's growing affluence came decadence. There was underlying corruption throughout the kingdom and especially religious idolatry.

The people had prostituted themselves to other gods. And then halfway through the century their world began to crumble. Jeroboam II of Israel was near the end of his reign and at the same time Assyria's problems became distant as they grew and grew in terrifying strength.

Within a generation the kingdom of Israel would be extinct and it was to this generation before their extinction that Hosea was sent to preach a message of repentance not just with words but with his family life.

It is into this situation that we have the word of God breaking in with an extraordinary command to Hosea verse 2 Go take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness and so he married Gomer.

[6 : 48] The Jerusalem Bible captures the shock of it a little better than the NIV that I just read from. It says go marry a whore and get children with a whore because the nation is a whore.

It means quite literally a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom. There's been a lot of discussion over the years about exactly what Hosea has been commanded by God to do here but it was most likely that he was that she Gomer was a practicing prostitute when they married rather than becoming one later in their marriage.

Hosea is called here to shower his love upon a woman of unknown faithlessness who will continue in that vein throughout their married life.

It is before us in verse 2 a marriage made in heaven that is a living hell for Hosea.

The movie Pretty Woman isn't a modern take on the Hosea Gomer story. Hosea here is not the wealthy businessman rescuing the prostitute the prostitute with a heart of gold and a lovable innocence who's just been served up a whole lot of bad luck in her life.

[8 : 21] That's not the story. This is not Pretty Woman eight centuries before. Deep down Gomer is a person of unfaithfulness. That is her character.

She will openly and consistently betray Hosea and she will rub his nose in it. Why does God call this man to do this?

Because Hosea's marriage to Gomer represents God's relationship to his people Israel. Just as Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea so God's people Israel are unfaithful to him.

It's all there in verse 2 because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery the vilest whoredom in departing from the Lord.

Israel didn't deserve God's love. Israel and God weren't the perfect match. It wasn't that God looked down from heaven across all the nations of the earth and thought Israel they're the most godly they're the one most suited to me they're the one most deserving of my love.

[9 : 28] Israel was just like any other people they were no better. they were faithless like the rest of us God amazingly chose them to be his bride his special covenant people.

And so every time God's people saw Hosea walking down the street through the mall with Gomer on his arm or every time they hear the news of her latest infidelity around town they receive a message from God.

Hosea's life and marriage is a living parable designed to confront God's people with the full horror of how they have treated God. Hosea's life plays out this message in all its rawness so that we so that he the people of God and we the people of God can feel the heart of God.

at least one of the messages of Hosea is that God suffers and this book helps us to see what God thinks and feels about our sin and our failure and our presumption it breaks his heart.

Israel presumed that God wouldn't care about their faithlessness and they had a cavalier attitude towards their sin and they were wrong it's an act of betrayal and so as we see here God the broken hearted lover becomes the angry lover of his people we see God's judgment on his faithless bride played out in the names of his three children in chapter one the first one there is a son born in verse

four named Jezreel it means God scatters it's a strange name why would you call your child Jezreel Jezreel was a place of infamy it's like calling your child twin towns or Port Arthur and then the next child in verse six is a daughter low which means not loved what a terrible name not loved it's time for dinner you can imagine the cost of counselling to sort that one out notice especially the gradual deterioration of the relationship revealed in the names

[12:06] God scatters they're not loved and in the last child verse eight is another name son named Lo-Ami and this is the most shocking name of all the covenant refrain throughout the old testament the marriage vows between God and his people if you like is you are my people and I am your God that comes up again and again and again and so this is devastating God's patience had run out with his faithless people it is like he is taking back his marriage vows he is divorcing his people and you can understand it God had called them to himself he had rescued them from slavery in Egypt he had made them his own he had given them his law that they would govern their relationship and frame how his new bride would live with him but three words sum up the actions and the attitude of Israel and Gomer it's there in chapter 2 verse 13 me she forgot

I will punish her for the day she burnt incense to the bals she decked herself with rings and jewelry and went after other lovers but me she forgot declared the Lord and this chapter 2 spells out Israel's utter abandonment of their covenant relationship with God they had fallen for the same lie that was there in the garden of Eden that their husband their father their God was holding out on them that he is stingy that he is mean that real life is found somewhere else and in someone else's arms they ran after others and attributed all the good things that they had in life to their lovers rather to their faithful and good husband and so the shock of chapter 1 verse 9 is God saying you are no longer my people I am no longer your God God wanted these

Israelites his people to know that he was angry with them and the judge would come it did come as God had promised Israel was destroyed and the people of God were either killed or deported but the judgment that came to Israel from the hand of God through the armies of Assyria in 722 BC was not the end yes God is a broken hearted lover and yes he is an angry lover but he is also the faithful lover take a look at verse 10 yet what a word yet yet is the great good news that changes the whole mood of this text yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore which cannot be measured or counted in the place where it was said to them you are not my people they will be called sons of the living God the people of Judah and the people of

Israel will be reunited and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land for great will be the day of Jezreel say of your brothers my people and of your sisters my loved ones what a dramatic change of mood the message of judgment and the message of hope and salvation derive from the same source it is the same God the same covenant that was the source of his anger and his righteous anger is the same covenant which is the source of his faithful love he promised that he would love them and be faithful to them and to keep his promise to them what God promises he must do he will not and he cannot forsake his promises to his people he has committed himself to them in love and so in chapters 2 verse 14 through to 23 is a moving and it is a beautiful song of God's tender love and commitment to his wayward faithless people have a look just at verse 14 with me

I am going to allure her I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her that's beautiful there is no coercing there's no raving and ranting there's no let's try and meet halfway you love me a little bit I'll love you back a little bit there is precious little exercise of power and force in this love triangle because power in a relationship would solve nothing to just let that one sink in for a little bit an exercise of power would not wing back the heart of his love because it's the heart of his love that he wants it is such a tender gentle forgiving deliberate commitment to win over his wife there is no sense of subjugating her no sense of controlling her let me tell you as a

[17:43] Christian and as a husband I read verse 14 and I conclude it makes absolute perfect sense why God would say to me husband Steve love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her because he has given himself up for you according to verse 14 God's love for his people is what roused Hosea to go again and show love to his unfaithful wife she is loved by another man she is in the arms of another man but Hosea is loved by God and so he will pay the price to get his wife back see the beginning of chapter 3 the Lord said to me go show your love to your wife again though she is loved by another and is an adulteress love her as the Lord loves the Israelites and verse 2 so

I bought her for 15 shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethic of barley it it it would seem from verse 2 that Hosea had to scrape together everything that he had a bag of grain as well everything that he had in order to pay the price to buy his wife back was the price the price of her debts was it the price that her pimp required was a compensation for the disgruntled boyfriend or simply according to Exodus the price of a slave woman whatever the price is the price to redeem her is insight into how far she has fallen and how tightly she is held by another Nat and I just celebrated 15 years of marriage some of you saw that on

Facebook we've got three kids but that's about as far as the comparisons go between us and Hosea and Gomer if I was in Hosea's shoes here I could imagine the people of God and my own heart saying just divorce her she doesn't love you the Bible makes it clear you justify it here Steve the Hosea I am

Gomer I am the person of deep unfaithfulness has it hit you yet my friends we are Gomer we are the wife of whoredom of deep unfaithfulness Romans 3 paints a terrible picture of our character there is no one righteous not even one there is no one who understands no one who seeks God all have turned away turned away from him put their backs to him and together they have become worthless worthless we are undeserving of God's love for us but God wants you to remember that his desire to have you back is not based on some naive estimation of your character the point of Hosea is that

God exalts his mercy by not giving up on his wife of Horem even though we are worthless and we are unworthy God paid the price and he brought us back to himself Jesus gave up his life to redeem to pay the price what a wonderful fulfillment of the rawness of these verses comes in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ Romans 5:8 puts it beautifully God demonstrates his own love for us in this that while we were sinners while we were whores Christ died for us and so if we put our trust in Christ then we can be sure that we are of the people of God for whom he died and loves we are the people to whom he has made covenant promises forever the apostle

[23:03] Peter echoes the words of Hosea as he writes to the people of God who have put their trust in Jesus with these words you are a chosen people a royal priesthood a holy nation a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light once you were not a people but now you are the people of God once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy and if you have accepted God's love for you in the Lord Jesus and put your trust in him then it means that you belong to God's people you are his bride he's the beautiful New Testament preacher and if that has happened in our lives then it must have profound repercussions on how we live his love and his mercy and grace leaves no room for complacency because straight after declaring that we are the people of God and that we have received his mercy his chosen people

Peter says this in verse 11 dear friends I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world abstain from sinful desires which go to war on your soul too often we think little about disobedience we just think God will overlook it he'll forgive that's what he does best if the Lord Jesus has invited us to become part of his people his bride doesn't that make our disobedience against him a really serious thing just think for a moment about the hurt it causes our divine lover when we take him for granted and we live unfaithfully to him you see the closer the relationship you have with someone the more they can hurt you a stranger insults you and you brush it off relatively quickly an argument with a friend can get you down for days the betrayal of a spouse creates wounds that endure for many years and let me just say if you know first hand those kinds of wounds from a spouse then at least take this comfort

God knows first hand those wounds and what they feel like he has been portrayed by his bride century after century after century God understands the pain as he sees his own people flirting with other lovers going off with the gods of this world and pursuing the desires of their hearts he is not number one in their heart bowing down superficially on Sunday and the odd weekly meeting and then going off with the gods of wealth and prosperity and comfort and pleasure and ambition and leisure and security what Hosea does for us what it should do for us it open our eyes not only to the awesome nature of God's love for us but also the terrible harm our sin causes in our relationship with him it breaks his heart and so

Hosea here challenges us to examine the nature of our love and particularly whether or not we love our God it is a passionate personal relationship with the living God is that how you would describe your relationship with God is love characterised by faithfulness and by devotion to God alone is it

seriously a case of man and woman standing up and saying forsaking all others I commit myself to you is that how you would describe your relationship with Christ is it authentic and not just the performance or a serrade of following some acceptable religious behaviour Hosea helps me to see that God wants me to love him warmly as a husband and not just serve him dutifully as a master when you think my friends of your failures and hopefully that's what you are doing right now you think of your failures and your sins and your half-heartedness that you're not fully devoted to Christ and God wants you to remember that his desire to have you back is not based on a naive estimation of your character we are

Goma and he knows it the point of Hosea is that God exalts his mercy by not giving up on his wife of Hordom the good news of Hosea in the whole Bible is that God knows that we have sold ourselves for a song and yet he is wooing us tenderly with his love in the Lord Jesus Christ according to Hosea 2.16 God does not want you to return and say to him yes sir I'll try harder this year he wants you to respond to him my husband my lover God wants your heart not just your hands because if he has your heart he has everything and so my friends we struggle that's that is the picture of the Christian life and what we look forward to as his people is the day when all unfaithfulness is finally dealt with the war against our souls is over in Revelation 19 we see [29 : 15] God finally and eternally destroying the great prostitute the mother of all unfaithfulness and then in chapter 21 it says then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there is no longer any sea I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away that is his promise to his bride let's pray friends and in praying can I just encourage you just to bow your heads now and just reflect upon this message and maybe

God in his spirit by his spirit has roused in you a sin failures that you need to bring to him right now to take them seriously as he takes them seriously and then I'll pray our loving and faithful heavenly father our husband our lover we give you thanks for calling us to be your children you have made us your bride you adopt us as your people you have showered us with every good gift and promised us eternal life with you in perfection in your great love and mercy you have cleansed us from all of our unfaithfulness you have made us pure and clean in your sight through the

Lord Jesus Christ and yet father we are still unfaithful to you we fail to love you as we should we run after other gods you are not always the first love of our heart forgive us we pray for our unfaithfulness renew us and restore us again by your grace that we may continue as your bride and declare your praise and your glory and the magnificence of your mercy we we we we give you thanks for the confidence that we have in the Lord Jesus both of forgiveness and of a future where we will dwell with you in perfect faithfulness forever and we ask it all for your glory amen we're going to continue to pray we're going to go straight into the Lord's supper a reminder of the price that was paid so that we can be the bride of Christ so if you'd like to bow your heads we'll pray and then remind it again as we take these elements of the great love that

God has for us in Christ our gracious Father you are worthy of all praise and glory and honour because you're the one who sustains all things by your powerful word and we want to especially thank you this morning for the Lord Jesus we want to thank you that through his death and his resurrection he paid the complete debt of our sin he's redeemed us brought us back to be your people and he has eternally forever delivered everyone who trusts in him from your judgment for unfaithfulness and so this morning we remember what he's done for us we thank you for these gifts of bread and wine and pray that we who take them now might do so in remembrance of the cost of Christ's love for us and may we truly share in his eternal inheritance Father we thank you that you spiritually feed us and nourish us through your son the Lord

Jesus and we ask that you might do that for us now we pray that as we eat and we drink that we would be assured of your goodness and your love for us we ask Father that you might renew us by your Holy Spirit that you might unite us together around your son and that you might keep us and sustain us until we enter your perfect glory and so we eat this bread and we drink this cup together as your people and we together proclaim our unity in your son and we pray these things through the Lord Jesus Christ Amen