

The passion at the heart of the universe

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. (Hosea 11: 1-4)

It is of course possible to misrepresent God by failing to do justice to his majesty. Four centuries ago Martin Luther accused the scholar Erasmus of just such a theological crime. "Erasmus, your thoughts of God are too human!" he complained. Michelangelo's superb portrait of the Creator on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome translates the same unfortunate caricature into fine art. Masterpiece though it undoubtedly is, he depicts God as Santa Claus on hormone therapy, with long white hair and flowing beard attached incongruously to the muscular body of an Olympic gymnast.

But, though it is easy to paint God too small in this way, it is also tempting to go too far in the opposite direction. If it is possible to have thoughts of God which are too human, it is also possible to have thoughts of him which are not human enough. Do you notice, for instance, the tender way in which the prophet Hosea describes God's feelings for Israel in the opening lines above? He is portraying God in soliloquy. By this dramatic device he dares to open a window for us into the very heart and mind of God . . . the humanity of God.

What do we find when we look through that audacious window? Do we find the stern impartiality of a judge; or the aloof dignity of a great sovereign? Astonishingly, the prophet tells us that we find the broken heart of a deserted parent! He depicts God looking back nostalgically to the days of the Exodus when he had first called Israel to be his own people. He likens him to a man who finds an orphaned baby boy whom he loves and adopts as his very own child. He goes on to describe the way this parent gently nurses the child through the precious early years, supporting him as he makes his first faltering steps and applying the antiseptic cream to soothe the toddlers bumps and bruises. It is hard to imagine God's dealings with Israel being described with greater affection. Yet, despite all this fatherly goodness that God has displayed, what had this much loved infant turned into? An inconsiderate, surly and rebellious lout—that's what!

They didn't acknowledge I was the one who was healing them. And the more I called their name "Israel! Israel!", the further they went away from me.

We might have thought that one of the advantages of being God is that you never have to experience the feeling of being let down. After all, omniscience can foresee the future infallibly and omnipotence can control it. Surely God is not only too big to cry, he is so big he never has to cry? But not according to Hosea, "Sure, God is never taken by surprise," he says. "But that doesn't mean he can never be hurt. Sure, he's never thwarted; but that doesn't mean he's never disappointed. Sure, he's never reduced to helplessness but that does not mean he's never reduced to tears." Hosea had come to realise that God really loved his

people and longed that his people should love Him. But love is something that you cannot coerce by mere exercise of power or strength of will. Love is something that the other person can always deny you if they insist upon doing so. They can even deny it to omnipotence.

Hosea knew from personal experience that there is no pain in the whole world quite so intense as that associated with unrequited love. Some of us, I guess, know it too. For, like him, we have been rejected by those we've loved: our family, our lover and, most tragically of all perhaps, our church. Well, the prophet would have us realise that God does not just offer us patronising pity when we feel like that. He insists that God knows exactly how we feel because he's been there. God, himself, is no stranger to the pain of a broken heart.

What does he do with such turbulent feelings? Anger and love collide in the divine heart and struggle to find resolution?

Will they not return to Egypt? And will not Assyria rule over them? How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? All my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger.

Look with me for a moment at Jesus, hanging on the cross. See there the passion that lies at the heart of the universe. This very passion that Hosea describes for us in such compelling and poignant terms. You want to see how much the heart of God is wounded by the ingratitude of our indifference? You want to see how much the heart of God is angered by the callousness of our indifference? You want to know how much God loves this world in spite of that thankless and cruel indifference? You want to see how determined God is that his anger will not have the last word against us? Look at the cross! See it there in the passion of his Son. The very shape of the cross seems to symbolise the fierce collision of contradictory feelings which Hosea speaks about. There the divine love and the divine anger meet in one momentous catharsis of divine emotion. As the apostle Paul puts it, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

*The other gods were strong but thou wast weak
They strode, but thou didst stumble to thy throne.
Yet to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak,
And not a God has wounds but thou alone.*

(from a poem by Edward Shillito (1872-1948), a Free Church minister in England during World War I)