



Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time 2006

Hosea 2: 16-25 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 Mark 2: 18-22

For those of us who can still remember old -time missions with their emphasis on fear and recriminations, the idea of forgiveness of sin described in terms of seduction is rather puzzling.

The word reconciliation is much more meaningful. It suggests the restoration of that which was lost.

In human terms the breakdown of a relationship is never simple. We speak of “faults on both sides” in an effort to be objective. In our covenant with God there aren’t “faults on both sides”. God loves us unconditionally.

It follows that in seeking reconciliation with God we can’t claim any usual excuses like, “I wasn’t understood”. It also follows that in seeking reconciliation with God we might expect that the process won’t be easy. Our experience of being weak in the presence of power is usually shaming.

How extraordinary then to read this passage from Hosea. God is not pictured as “a pillar of righteous indignation” but as a lover, desperate because of the loss of the beloved.

God invites the beloved to the desert, the place of the “honeymoon”, to rekindle the original fervour. God promises a restoration of all the things that delighted the beloved at the beginning of the relationship. In 21-22, we hear God pronouncing the wedding vows, the restoration of the spousal gift. In all of this outpouring from God there is no threat or compulsion, for where there is fear there cannot be love.

Jesus uses the image of spouse in his talk with the disciples. The new group is trying to forge a sense of identity and like all new groups they use comparisons with other groups to help this process. Disciples in two other prominent groups are fasting as a spiritual practice. Jesus’ disciples want to know should they be fasting. Fasting was used for two main reasons which were linked. The principal reason was as a sign of mourning and was part of the ritual of the grieving process.

The other was as a sign of repentance, a mourning for sins committed. Apart from the Jewish days of solemn mourning, like the Day of Atonement, some used fasting as part of their personal piety. The Pharisees fasted two days a week.

Jesus answers in the rabbinical style with a counter-question:

Do you fast at weddings? In other words, is this an appropriate time for mourning? While the wedding banquet is in progress, joy and celebration are the appropriate activities. Jesus indicates that their ministry is to be joy-filled.

The wedding banquet is a symbol of the presence of the kingdom of God working in our midst. On the day the bridegroom goes you can fast. By the turn of the century the church had instituted a fast on "that day" Friday. It also had one on Wednesdays so as to provide an alternative to the Monday and Thursday fasts of the Pharisees. The early church may have slipped into this practice because of feelings of inferiority or because they felt inadequate to explain their belief in resurrection.

If we believe in the presence of the risen Jesus with us then the festivities go on. We do not mourn the death of one who lives and is in our midst. Jesus reminds us that it is important to act in accordance with our beliefs, not to do something because someone else does it. Over time we have dropped the weekly fast days. Apart from the assigned days of Lent, fasting is a matter of personal piety.

The final parable reiterates the message. When the new emerges it cannot be tacked on to the old. Both will suffer damage. If you believe in the new then you must let go of the old.

It was a hard lesson for the early community. It is a hard lesson for us. When changes in society and in our understanding of human development make us re-examine our church customs and practices then our yardstick is fidelity, first and foremost, to the Gospel.

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