

On Monday evening I was sitting in the living room. Because it was so hot I was I had all the doors in the rear of the Vicarage open out onto the garden to let the breeze in. It was lovely.

I was sitting watching TV, when I noticed a very industrious squirrel under the tree eating a half-eaten apple. I was impressed that he had managed to carry it over the fence from the school or the cemetery before he finished eating it.

Watching him eat made me think that an apple would be nice – so I got up and when through to the fruit bowl on the dining table. Alas the two apples which had been in the bowl were gone!! The squirrels apple had not come from next door, it had come into the house and taken it from me!!

I didn't know whether to be cross or amused!

It did make me wash the table cloth and whip out the bowl – which I am sure is a good thing, and I went and bought a new bag of apples which I am now keeping in the fridge.

As we know life can be full of surprises - often happen unexpectedly – and many things take hard work and require patience and perseverance on our part. And what on first look can appear to be one thing, upon further investigation can be something very different.

Yesterday afternoon in the chapel downstairs a couple came to re-affirm their marriage vows. In the conversations with them, and some of the others who were present we were reflecting that complexity of relationships means that we experience both difficult times that are often unforeseen, but equally joy and gladness that we had anticipated.

The unexpected, perseverance and in a sense of the complexity of relationships is at the heart of all three of our readings today.

First we have this very difficult and complex reading from Hosea, which appears to be about marriage. On the surface, it seems obvious why Hosea would choose marriage imagery to convey the intimate relationship between God and God's people, as marriage still represents one of the most poignant relationships throughout human culture. However our modern understanding of marriage is very different from that of the Ancient Israelites, and so we need to be careful about how we interpret this metaphor. While marriage still represents a covenant, especially in the Christian community, most now view marriage as a relationship into which both parties willingly enter. In the ancient patriarchal world, however, marriage constituted a covenant relationship between two unequal parties¹. Within the metaphor Hosea signifies God who is worthy and whole, and Gomer who is Israel is like a woman who is unclean and unfit but still must be wed.

It is a difficult image even in its ancient context, let along to our modern ears and eyes. Today's passage finishes with hope, while Israel will pass through the judgment of God's rejection, God will ultimately redeem Israel, once more calling them "Children of the living God." Even with this hope however it does not remove

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1802

the odd metaphor or unexpected connotations of what it means to be in a covenant relationship where the parties by definition are not equal.

But that is also the reality of our covenant with God which is made at our baptism. In our baptism we are drawn into a covenant with God as adopted children, Jesus says, but it is not an equal relationship, though it is a more positive relationship than the ancient rite of marriage!

The nature of this relationship is also at the heart of the reading that we heard from the Colossians, another passage filled with metaphors. This time however the question is not about faithfulness but about the characteristics of Christian practice. It would appear from what is expressed in the letter to the Colossians that there were members of the community who were mystical, and also had a euphoric approach to their praise and worship. It is hard to tell whether it is what we might call charismatic, or mystical contemplation – but judgement had arisen as to whether this was good practice and a sign of God's spirit in the midst of the community. The writer of this letter, who most recent research believes was not Paul but a later teacher, was criticising those who believed themselves better in the faith than others because of the spiritual experience that they were having. There is more than one way to encounter God, and to express our faith and praise.

Interestingly this challenge has re-emerged in the church in almost every generation – and some of you may have experienced this. I know I have been approached by people in the street at times, even when I am dressed as a cleric and asked if I want to really know Jesus, and when I wish them well and point out I have a faith – they have commented – yes but is it a real faith and do you know the holy spirit. Sometimes our zeal for our faith can stop us seeing God in others or in our midst – which is part of what this passage is addressing.

So we have one passage which challenges the kind of relationship we might have with God, one passage which is about expectations we might put in place about faith – and with these both in mind we turn to our Gospel reading which is at its heart a reading about our practice and perseverance in prayer. But this well-known passage is not as it might seem on face value. It is not a simple formula to address all the questions that are raised when we think about prayer.

How do we hear this invitation to pray and believe that God answers prayer when we look at the state of the world and the pain that is before us each day? I have taken to only watching or listening to the news on alternate days at present because the number and list of horrors seems too great. The front page of one of the Australian papers last week had a list of atrocities – 78 Nice..... it was a poignant list of the destruction of human life each day. Why is God not answering our prayer?

I remember once being told that “God always answers, but sometimes the answer is ‘no.’” But that is not what Jesus is saying in this passage, and while I do believe that sometimes God says no, I don't think that is what is happening most of the time.

I do believe God is with us in the midst of all the struggling and pain, personal or global, and I believe that God suffers with us, as God also rejoices with us (as we talked about last Sunday).

Prayer, as Jesus points out takes perseverance, but it is also active and passive.

Prayer isn't just sitting around waiting for the answers. Prayer is also listening with our hearts to the actions that we can take to bring about the change that is required. David Lose² calls this shameless prayer. This is based on the translation of a word in Luke 11 - anaedeia in the Greek, which most translations render as "persistence" (11:8). But a better translation might be "shameless." Our prayers to God ought to be bold, audacious, and unfailingly confident.

He suggests that instead of waiting for God to change the world we actually start living into the reality of what we've prayed for. So rather than pray for someone who is lonely, maybe I'd go visit. Rather than pray for an end to violence, maybe we campaign against use of extreme force. As we pray for safer streets maybe we visit a police station to tell officers that we are grateful for their service and pray for their safety. This could be true of almost any community or public service too.

At times prayer is words we say alone in moments of thanksgiving or desperation. At times prayer is words we share with others, gathered in the sanctuary or around a hospital bed. And at other times prayer is action and work as we try to live into and even bring about those things we've prayed for. All of this can be praying shameless, praying, that is, confident that the God who came in Jesus understands our hurts and disappointments because that God took them on³.

There is so much which is unexpected and unknown, as well as surprising. Today we are reminded of that, and of the joy of persistence, perseverance and even promise. All these things reminded me of the words of Teresa of Avila who said

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks
With compassion on this world.*

*Let nothing disturb you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things pass away:
God never changes.
Patience obtains all things.
Those who have God
Find they lack nothing;
God alone suffices.⁴*

At its heart maybe this is our call to prayer. Amen

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-10-c-shameless-prayer/>

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/07/pentecost-10-c-shameless-prayer/>

⁴ <http://spckpublishing.co.uk/blog/spck-prayer/prayers-of-st-teresa-of-avila-1515-1582/>

9th after Trinity – 24th July 2016
Hosea 1: 2-10 ; Colossians 2: 6-15 and Luke 11: 1-13