

Morning Service on the occasion of the Commencement of Michaelmas Law Term

St Michin's Church, Dublin

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Address

Hosea 1: 1 - 10

Acts 20: 17-38

Good morning. Thank you very much for the kind invitation to join with you in marking the commencement of Michaelmas Term.

I must begin by explaining the choice of today's readings. The Revised Common Lectionary has set readings for every day, designed to take the reader through the whole bible in around 2 years. My default on such invitations is simply to ask for the set readings of the day. It saves you from my various hobby horse passages and playing lectionary roulette is the sort of thing that makes clerical life so exhilarating. The wheel was rolled, and I had to take what I was given. Would it be any of the fantastic stories of God calling Abraham, giving the law to Moses, anointing David as King? Maybe it would be the beatitudes, the parable of the good Samaritan, or even 1 Corinthians 13 about the power of love.

Alas, it was not to be. Just like an Ulster side at Thomand Park all hope was brutally crushed. I came up short with the readings of the day! Nobody wants to land on Hosea, chapter 1.

"The Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' So, he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son."

It's really all a bit much for a Monday morning. As if it wasn't bad enough to have it read the first time.

Nobody wants the story of a minor prophet from the 8th century BC, whose vocation in life was to marry an unfaithful woman, as a metaphor for God's relationship with the unfaithful nation of His people, Israel. Yet this was his calling. His role. His vocation. This was his lot. The time into which he was born. The path that he had to cross. The role that he had to play. Hosea the man. Hosea the prophet. Living in a time, a land, a context in which the nation Israel had moved very far from living in right relationship with God.

What are we to do with this? Well, first we need to be very careful before we jump too easily to simplistic conclusions and start lambasting our land and the times we live in. A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. The world we live in is a complex place. Forgive the source given that I live in Belfast but am speaking in Dublin, but just yesterday the top 10 most read items on the BBC website included Theresa May confirming her belief in Brexit, fewer defectors from North Korea under Kim Jong-Un, and Alan Titchmarsh herding 30 sheep across London Bridge – by all accounts at least one of those stories is true.

We cannot simply transplant Hosea's vocation and message onto these shores, so why stick with this text, rather than contacting Archdeacon Pierpoint and asking him to quietly change that passage to the one about 'Blessed are the peacemakers'?

Why stick with this? I would not have chosen it. Yet it struck me. We do not often have the luxury of choosing the day that comes before us. We do not always get to choose the client that walks in through the door. We do not get to choose the cases that come before us in the courtroom. And in actual fact, if things get that far, it is because life is not the way it should be. Most, if not all of the roles represented here in this place, exist in and because of the messy-ness of life, the brokenness, the rupture between the good we believe in, and the reality we live in. Professionally, our clients, our patients, our parishioners, the jobs we

get given to so, the tasks we have to complete, more often than not – we do not get a choice in who or what comes our way. Hosea probably did not want his job, and I did not want to have to read about it. If that much is true of our professional lives, then it is also true of every other room we move in and out of. At a deeply personal level we do not always get to choose the diagnosis that cuts across our hopes. We do not get to select the family traumas that hit us, or the change in life circumstances that simply comes our way.

Most obviously, and yet most likely to be overlooked, is that we do not get to choose the times that we live in, the land of our birth, and we may or may not be in agreement or alignment with the culture and the choices of the time and generation in which we live.

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

How will we live? Who will we be? In our land. Our context.

What are you in for?

It was around twenty years ago when I was not wearing these robes, but rather those of a Junior Barrister in Northern Ireland. I've been perhaps where some of you are now, milling around waiting for the magic brief to drop as very intelligent and experienced lawyers suddenly realise that even they cannot be in three courts at once (or settle two along the way). As I set out for a life of high drama in helping to shape the laws of a nation, I received one of my very first briefs, and really, rather like Hosea, it was not the job I was hoping for. It was time to ditch the robes and head to the Magistrates Court in Craigavon for a speeding case. I took the company car known as Ulsterbus to Craigavon, which is the courthouse very close to the quiet, sleepy little hamlet of Portadown where I grew up. The housing area in which I grew up had a reasonable working relationship with Craigavon Magistrates Court. We had many frequent attenders, but not all of them came home. There I was. Suited and booted. Armed with the facts of my case and a pretence at knowing the law of the land. I was standing outside the courtroom doing my best to look professional, and legal, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a young guy who grew up in our housing area. I hadn't seen him in a few years, but he didn't look like he had just finished studying jurisprudence.

He saw me, strolled over, and asked – “Well, Fordo, what are you in for?”!

Who was I? The boy from the estate? The barrister with the degree? The professional with the rules of my vocation? Or all of the above?

We are the composite parts of our person, our character, shaped by our learning, our experiences, lived out in the reality of every single day that is before us. The ones we would choose, and the ones we would not.

Who will we be? In the day, the term, that lies ahead. What will shape our person, our character, as we undertake our vocations – the ones we would choose, and the ones we would not?

The whole purpose of God

Hosea entered into the mess of his own world, embraced an unfaithful wife, to symbolise God's judgment on a people who had walked away from him, and yet also to point towards God's ultimate redemption, his loving rescue, for an unfaithful people. Entering the mess, speaking truth that is honest about failings and the judgment that will follow, yet pointing ultimately to love. All a foreshadowing of what Paul would refer to in our reading from Acts as “declaring the whole purpose of God”.

How might we live, who might we be, how might our nation be shaped, if we pay attention to the whole purpose of God?

Surely it must include the coming of Jesus to live among us. The moment that reminds us of the dignity and value and worth of every human being. Those you want to see this day. And those you would rather not. That reminder of the fundamental equality of personhood that we should seek for all, and not just a greater

share for ourselves. That humility is amongst our greatest strengths. That walking away from the mess is not an option. That being present, sticking in, being faithful for what is right, is better than being faithless for the sake of what is easy.

Surely it must include the life Jesus lived among us. Speaking truth in love. Correcting error but forsaking judgmentalism. Touching the untouchable. Praying for strength in each new day. Walking with friends. Eating with enemies. Being an instrument of healing. Overturning injustice.

Surely it must include the death of Jesus on a cross. Mercy that says – you might deserve equal and opposite punishment, but not today. That act that reminds each of us and the world we live in, that life actually is broken. That every law we pass, and every rights framework we seek to construct, is actually an admission that something is awry within ourselves, our communities, our world, and between our experience of this life, and the reason for which we were made. The cross that is honest about my faults, your faults, and yet when we are down says, let me carry that for you.

Surely it must include the rising of Jesus from the dead. The hope that life will prevail over death, light over darkness, joy over sorrow, that no matter how dark the night, dawn is coming. No matter how closed the cell, the door will open. No matter how final the judgment, grace will triumph. If mercy says we do not get what we deserve, though we are not good, the gift of grace is that we do get what we do not deserve, and it is good.

Surely it must include the departure of Jesus to be with his father. Reminding us, and leaving us, with the responsibility to live this life well here on earth. To tell a better story and to be a better story, in our person, our character, our context – whether we would choose it or not.

Is this whole gospel not the better way? It may not yet be the one that you have chosen beyond all reasonable doubt, but on balance, is there not enough of a ring of truth in it to suggest that this picture of life is a world that we would choose to shape, to live in, to hope for, in our time, our land, our generation? The whole purpose of God that calls us to image Christ in:

Affirming the dignity, value and worth of all humans equally
Seeking the good of others and not just ourselves
Daring to be present through thick and thin
Speaking up for truth,
Living marked by compassion
Destroying our enemies by making them our friends
Showing mercy when all we want is retribution
Bring honest about our faults and the imperfections of the day ahead
Bringing hope, being light, releasing joy
Reminding ourselves that the day we are in is a gift, and
By the grace of God, we will bring the grace of God even when others do not deserve it, because here is the rub, neither do we

Surely it must include all of this in the knowledge that for all that we do in the day that is given to us, and that will ultimately pass, in the end we will all be weighed and measured, by this same God who tasked a little known prophet called Hosea, to live well in his own mess, speaking about God's judgment in truth, and his redemption in love.

Who will we be?
How will we live?
In a day that may not be of our choosing.
In the term that lies ahead?
With the life that has been given to us?
I pray we will choose well. Amen.