

Hymns: 658 “A charge to keep I have”
 “Marching to Zion”
 634 “Fight the good fight”

Readings: Hosea 11:1-11
 Luke 12:13-21

“THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD”

The Prime Minister has this morning vowed to put Britain at the forefront of defeating slavery whose modern form (she says) is “the greatest human rights issue of our time”.

We must wish her well and pledge our support. Slavery offers the clearest possible evidence of humanity’s fatal flaw. To turn another person into a piece of property, to assert ownership of a fellow human being, to demand compensation for a freed slave – and to defend these feelings and actions with rational argument is as debased and debauched a way of behaving as it’s possible to imagine.

We must recognise slavery for what it is and oppose it with all our vigour. And, as we identify the speck in an offender’s eye we should also be ready to see the plank in our own.

Slavery is a good place to begin this morning’s sermon. Here we are in the United Kingdom, still navigating turbulent political waters, with heightened rhetoric still very much in vogue. Meanwhile, our American visitors, in the aftermath of the party conventions in Cleveland and Philadelphia, are coping with claims and counterclaims and ultra-sensitive public remarks. And our Ghana Fellowship is here in full array to celebrate their anniversary. As I said, slavery is a good place to begin this morning’s sermon – it’s a theme that weaves its way in and out of the experience and cultures of all of us.

My oldest African-American friend, Wesley Williams of Massachusetts, is the son of Willard Williams and Annie-Laurie Williams. Willard was a fellow student of Martin Luther King and the Kings and the Williams were lifelong friends. Annie-Laurie Williams used to regale us with her tales of olden times. Well into her 80s she recalled her childhood in the deep south. She was raised by her grandmother who had herself been a slave. Wesley Williams has helped me to get as close to the mind and soul of black Americans as it’s possible for a white man to reach. I have felt the anger – residual, latent, “genetic”; I have sensed the wound that’s never healed and been swept by raw passion that flares up, breaks out, roars its discontent when black people are mistreated or murdered on the streets or thrown disproportionately into prison.

These feelings are the legacy of slavery. How many times have I heard comfortable white men in the executive class mutter “why can’t they get it out of their system?”

Whenever I hear it, I want to retort that my own observation that they, comfortable white people, need to get their assumed and unquestioning sense of superiority out of their system too.

We're not much better here in the UK. Slavery was as much part of the wealth creation programmes of the 19th century here as they ever were in the USA. It was just hidden from our eyes – it existed as an institution in faraway places in days when travel was difficult. Whole cities – Bristol and Liverpool for example – were built on the slave trade. Fortunes were made. Titles conferred. There's no doubt in my mind that slavery is as much part of the British psyche as it ever was elsewhere.

And in Ghana you can still see the way it all happened. In Cape Coast, just visit the castle where hordes of African men and women were manacled and shackled together awaiting their exit via that baleful portal above which has been written "abandon hope all ye who enter here." Slavery is a feature of Ghanaian history too.

So slavery links us all this morning. And it helps me understand the mind of the ancient prophet Hosea.

Hosea prophesied almost 3000 years ago – in the eighth century BC.

He reminds his hearers that they are a chosen people beloved of God. Indeed God loved his people so much that he could be compared as a husband to a nation he took as his wife. You can't get much closer than that.

But the people had played fast and loose with God. This beloved wife had committed adultery, played the whore. She'd gone off and flirted with other gods. Again and again.

To illustrate the point, God told Hosea to marry a prostitute, and adulteress. He wanted the prophet to be a walking illustration of the position God found himself in. For he too had married a nation that turned out to be a prostitute. When Hosea's wife did the predictable thing and made off with other lovers, when she made a fool of him, inevitably there was a divorce. But God ordered Hosea to remarry her despite her unfaithfulness. Once again the implicit comparison with God's own readiness to recommit himself to the unfaithful nation he'd chosen and upon whom he conferred all his kindness is only too obvious.

God has persisted in the relationship with the feckless double-dealing of his people. He'd hung in there. On the face of it, he had plenty to justify not only abandoning his chosen people but actually bringing down punishment upon them.

The extent of God's displeasure can be sensed in the names which he suggested for Hosea's three children. In this church, we once baptised a baby called Molly Truly Scrumptious Smith! All cuddly-duddly, all sugar and spice. None of that for the children of Hosea. Just listen to their names:

- Jezreel – this was a valley in Israel where, 100 years previously, Jehu had fought a battle and gained the crown. The valley is said to have flowed with blood. Jehu was accused of using extreme violence in his search for power.

His dynasty had ruled since that day and the current descendant, King Jeroboam II, was particularly nasty. So this name called to mind a deep wrong that had been inflicted upon the people of Israel and needed to be overturned.

- Lo-ruhamah – this name, literally, means “not pitied”. God had shown his mercy again and again. It seemed boundless. The people took it for granted. God had reached the end of his compassion for such a stupid people. Pity had been squeezed out of him.
- Lo-ammi which means “not my people”. This is the ultimate word of despair from God. He’d reach the point where he was ready to disown his beloved and specially chosen people for all their promiscuity and fornication and adultery.

No wonder the prophet concluded, to sum up the wilfulness and waywardness of his people: “They have sown the wind and must reap the whirlwind.”

So God is fed up with the people he took to himself as a husband would take a wife. We’ve certainly got that message. But what was the core complaint of God. Was it just the promiscuity and adultery – the seeking of other partners? Wherein exactly was his sense of honour most breached?

They had certainly turned to other religious experiences. They had consulted omens – we can call that “augury.” They had enquired after departing spirits, indulging in “necromancy”. And they had set their future upon and interpretation of the stars, seeking out the laws of “astrology”. All that. And yet we still haven’t dug deep enough. We have yet to find the real source of God’s displeasure with them.

There had been times of prosperity in the recent past. There had been a cessation of the seemingly interminable wars with their neighbours. And entrepreneurs had taken advantage of those moments. And what happened as a result? In those times of relative prosperity, the wealthy classes controlled the process of the law and so were able to prevent the underprivileged from obtaining redress when they were squeezed out of their holdings, denied their rights, and forced to become the hired labourers or even slaves of their proprietors who built up huge farms and mighty profits to support the lavish and luxurious lifestyles they clearly desired.

We can easily slip in here a reference to the word of Jesus in our New Testament lesson – a stricture to the man who built an extra barn to accommodate his increasing wealth. The rich seem endlessly driven to become richer still. The commentator on this passage that I read describes these “arrogant magnates” who see no relationship at all between religion and ethics. For them, religion consisted in the dutiful compliance in cultic activity – offering sacrifices, paying a tithe, slipping a backhander to a friendly priest. It never translated itself into personal behaviour or social responsibility. And so the have nots in the society of Israel in the late 8th century BC were reduced to virtual slavery. And it was this total disregard for the plight of the people which made God most angry. He had not created men and women to become slaves. And if God was angry, so too were the people.

And so we now see how our themes come together. The slavery that is berated in this morning's news headlines, which underlies so much social discontent in the USA, that is more subtly present in the racism of contemporary Britain, and physical evidence of which can be seen only too easily along the West Coast of Africa. Slavery it is. The reduction of larger and larger numbers of people to virtual powerlessness at the hands of those who control their destiny.

The people, those who'd made their fortune, had abandoned God and his justice, his sense of fairness, his equal love for all his children. Yes the people had abandoned God.

But God has not abandoned them. Nor will he abandon them. The eleventh chapter of the Book of Hosea says so clearly. "I am God and not a mere mortal" he says. How can he turn his back on a people he taught to walk, whom he has led with bonds of love, whose face he held to his own cheek in the most intimate embrace, to whom he has bent down in order to feed them? How can he abandon people to whom he's been that close?

So we must conclude that this sorry tale of disruption in the family relationship, this dystopia that threatens the future of a whole people, shows God making yet another effort to remind people of the kind of social order that would be consistent with his benign purposes, a perfect expression of his unending love. It would be based, and must always be based, upon the love of neighbour as a necessary first step towards loving God himself.

I have in my hand a \$1 note. It's worth more now than it was before June 23rd. So I shall treasure it! But I shall also look at the word that's written on the back of it. A whole nation declaring, in the most public way possible, "in God we trust". We must remind our political leaders of this declaration of faith again and again in these troubled times. The prophet Hosea would not have hesitated to do. Amen.