

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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## KEEPING CHRIST CENTRAL

24<sup>th</sup> July 2016

Hosea 1:2-10

Colossians 2:6-15

However you look at it, the way Hosea begins his prophecy is a bit of a shocker. The older translations are the more graphic, of course, since their translators were thinking only of getting the sense of the words, not of how it might be interpreted. This is how the Authorised Version puts it:

*And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord.*

No mincing your words then.

Hosea lived in Israel during the eighth century BC. He made a disastrous marriage to a woman called Gomer. I don't suppose that when he married her he knew how unfaithful she would be. But maybe he did. Certainly he seems always to have forgiven her, no matter how she broke his heart. Together they had three children- two sons and a daughter - but she was a serial adulterer with many lovers. Yet it is this experience which lies at the heart of his prophecy. He sees a parallel in his experience with the relationship between a faithful God and a fickle people. For Gomer substitute the people of Israel, forsaking the true God and worshipping their idols such as Baal. But that is not the end of the analogy. Despite her behaviour Hosea continues to love Gomer and eventually claims her back as his wife, just as God, however he rails against his faithless people, always promises that he will never cast them off altogether. One commentator suggests that the whole book is 'full of the most tender human relationships, husband and wife, father and child, spoiled by wilfulness and sin and restored by unwearying compassion and love.' So Hosea is the man whose devotion to a faithless wife became a projection of the love of God for his faithless people.

In Colossians Paul is also talking about the temptations to faithlessness. He acknowledges that even though we know that God is the highest power, and that God is in Jesus and Jesus is in us, there are other thoughts and trends and beliefs that are out to captivate us. And they are captivating. It is hard to fly in the face of accepted wisdom. Ideas which have popular acceptance are attractive, or they would not be popular in the first place. In fact they are captivating – and Paul is going to make a great play on this idea of capture and captivity.

But, he says, don't let them captivate, or capture, you.

For Paul's audience the ideas would be to do with elemental spirits floating around, or esoteric knowledge to be gained by ascetic practices. This was known as Gnosticism,

and was a big thing in First Century thought in the Roman world. The zeitgeist has changed and what was popularly accepted then is scarcely thought of now. But there are still captivating ideas out there, ideas which it is hard to stand against, which are accepted by our world almost without thought.

There is the idea of the free market economy. There is Capitalism, or its opposite, Communism. There is Patriotism. There is the idea that the family must always come first. All of these and many more can be temptations to idolatry – ideas which must be served first of all, which cannot be questioned, which dictate how we should live. These are some of our temptations to idolatry, just as worship of the Baals was for the people of Israel to whom Hosea spoke, just as the esoteric knowledge of Gnosticism was for the Colossians and other first century Christians.

Our task is to keep Christ central in all things; to keep him central because his is central. But that is easier said than done. How are we to do this, and how are we to help the world do this, when increasingly the voice of the church goes unheeded in our land and other lands in the West. Just this week all the main churches of Britain had spoken against the renewal of Trident, but it is going ahead anyway. I don't think the opinion of the churches was even referred to in the debate. If it was, I missed it. If no one listens to us, how are we to keep Christ central? Is the response, sometimes seen, of maintaining an ageing and diminishing holy huddle, condemning all who spurn it really the way forward? Is that really keeping Christ at the centre? Christ who said he came not to condemn but to save the world?

We live in a multicultural world – yes, even here in our highland village – and there can be tensions between what we as Christians believe and what the world thinks. There can also be tensions within the church about how we should live out the centrality of Christ. In the aftermath of last autumn's Paris attacks a mosque in the Bishopbriggs area of Glasgow was set on fire. What was the response of a neighbouring church? It was to make their hall available to the Muslim community for Friday prayers. Was that compromising the Lordship of Christ or was it the Christian thing to do?

In the midst of last year's refugee crisis, the leader of a central European country argued that only by keeping the (largely Muslim) refugees out could we hope to preserve Europe's Christian heritage and values? Does that strike you as odd and contradictory, as it does me? Was the whole point of the parable of the Good Samaritan not that he belonged to a different tribe and culture to the injured traveller?

This week I saw online a report from the Guardian newspaper about St. Marks Church in Stoke on Trent, where the Rev. Sally Smith has been welcoming refugees and migrants for three years, since they began turning up on her doorstep. She feeds them, houses them, if need be, clothes them. She makes sure their medical needs are taken care of and their children have shoes to wear. Most of them are from Muslim countries, but many of them have not managed to find such a welcome in the mosques, some of which value the sanctity of their building above the lives of the people seeking help. But Rev. Sally has them flocking to her church: Iranians, Syrians, Eritreans, Bangladeshis and Iraqis. Her kindness has led many to convert to Christianity – and yes, she knows some of these conversions might be based on need and not faith, but she trusts the acceptance into a loving Christian community will do the rest.

What she is doing is what many Christian churches across Europe are doing, but not all of her congregation are with her in this work. Ms Smith says

*“My biggest challenge has been the attitude of some of the people within the church. I have had a lot of opposition. Criticism, negative attitudes and trying to undermine the work that we are doing – that’s from the white British congregation.*

*“I have lost lots of congregation members because of what has happened at the church. They don’t want the hassle and they don’t want the church being messed up. They see the church as having a very definite role and opening the doors to refugees isn’t one of them.”*

*She adds: “They expected a vicar’s role to be looking after the people inside the church and one of the insults often levelled at me is: ‘She cares more about the people outside the church than those inside.’ Well, this is what I am meant to be doing and you’re meant to be doing it with me. We should be doing this together.”*

If such a need were to present itself here in Laggan/Newtonmore, I wonder what our response would be? We live in a multicultural world and there can be tensions even about how we live as Christians. There can be tensions about how we keep Christ at the centre of what we do.

But one of the challenges facing the Christians at Colossae was that those who promoted Gnosticism thought that Christianity (as it was not then called!) was not spiritual enough, was too practical and earthy to be of spiritual use. As Christians we are called to love God above all, and to show it by the way that we love our neighbours, the practical ways, the ways of forgiveness – such as Hosea showed to his wife. And it will not always fit in with a pattern of faith on Sundays. And it will mean effort and it does mean putting ourselves out.

Paul and his people had to face the challenge of accepted world views, which neither listened to nor respected the Christian message of self-giving love for all, even for the enemy. We have to face our own challenges in that area. But Paul has this to say about the ideas of the age which can be so irresistible, so captivating. They have been captured. They have been nailed to the cross. They have been disarmed, made powerless and led in triumphal procession through the streets, shown to be inferior to the God who came to show us himself in Jesus and proved his love by his Son’s death for us.

We who live about two thousand years after Paul wrote his words have a historical perspective on this. That captivating movement which was Gnosticism, where is it now? It is long gone and forgotten. But the message of the cross is as new and fresh today as it ever was, and as powerful. And the same will happen to the captivating ideas of today – they will be outlived by the message of the cross.

We know that God loves us, we have seen it in the cross. We know that God loves even those who turn from him. As we are in Christ and he is in us, our task is not to be a holy huddle, but, allowing Christ to be central to our lives and to our thinking, to find ways of reaching out with practical love to the neighbours we are given. That is how the world is redeemed, as the sacrificial love of Christ is shown through his servants. Amen.