

Last Call For Lent

The Scripture today is marvellously appropriate for the day, the last Sunday before Lent begins. Hosea presents God as a jealous husband, whose wife is behaving like a tart. Like any husband in this position, God has alternatives. He can shrug his shoulders, cut his losses, and let her go. Or he can risk his dignity and self-respect by making a new bid for her. The second choice is what Hosea makes him do. God remembers the Exodus, and the covenant of Sinai at which he made his promise to be faithful to Israel. His plan is simple: to get her back into the desert, and remind her how she was in the good days when their love was new.

Either God or Hosea has a very short memory; because, if you remember, the Israel that followed Moses into the desert was far from being an ardent lover. Israel had been enslaved for the whole of living memory; and Moses found he was at the mercy of a multitude of brutalised and spiritless people, who could be bought off for the price of a good square meal. Within two days of the miraculous Red Sea crossing, they were whingeing about the good food they'd had in their slave-camps, and threatening to stone Moses to death for liberating them. Still, the desert proved to be a good school for them; and forty years later they had indeed become seasoned in the work of trust: and so they came to the gates of the Promised Land.

It's never an easy thing to go backwards. But sometimes we have to confess that we've taken a wrong choice, and must retrace our steps. I think the Church wants me to ask you, *Will you come into the desert this Lent?* It will mean acknowledging a wrong turning, and perhaps quite a large investment of time and effort in pursuing a wrong path, a path that will not lead to life. It will need detachment from things we've perhaps come to depend on. But (as Hosea would remind us) a married person must depend on the spouse, and forsake all others. Here we hit the barrier Israel hit. The quest for the true God is not one that we find easy or instantly appealing. God is invisible and has no name that we can speak. He denies us even our imagination, warns us we shall be in danger if we try to worship any image of him we might try to make. How do we begin to talk about loving this austere God? Especially if he should take from us the comforting things on which we rely, which (like the slaves' rations) suddenly seem powerfully real, and attractive.

Jesus speaks of himself as a bridegroom, and of his days as the days of a wedding-feast. That, at first, sounds much more our sort of religion. But then his language turns sombre: *The time will come for the bridegroom to be taken away from them: then they will fast.* What brings about this loss of the bridegroom? I think it is precisely that the bride gets cold feet and pulls the plug on the nuptials. That is what happened to Jesus. He was a warm, loving, and intensely attractive figure - just the one we would like to obey and be with. But suddenly his proposal appeared risky and dangerous. He was asking too much of us. We began to dislike the turn his conversation was taking - about laying down your life, and even taking up your cross. Then we realised that he *was*, indeed, going to carry a cross, *and* be nailed up on it. He was offering us a share in his fate.... That's the moment when we said *I've changed my mind.*

Nevertheless, the invitation still stands: to be conned into the desert like a treacherous wife, to revisit that crossroads where we first went wrong, and in humility to choose again. To begin to fast from the food of slavery, by which we are pretending to be satisfied, and to choose the rough food of travellers in hard places. To be made new in the crucible of thirst for God, so as to be able to contain the new wine that will only flow at Easter. The question is: do you hear in these words the ring of truth? If you do, you must accept the Ashes this Wednesday, and set out on the awesome pilgrimage of the Lenten wilderness.