

When God makes us, he creates us as individuals, with our own irreplaceable value and our own share of his gifts. You could say that any human being is like a work of art made by God's specific choice.

But this would be to risk a distortion in our self-understanding. Because God's aim in creating is *communication* - his self-giving - and eventually *communion* - our receiving of him through and in what he has made.

This makes a huge difference to the way we understand ourselves. We aren't made to sit on a plinth and look good to God. We are made to be an everlasting gift from God to his world, and to be factors in the re-creation of the world as a communion. In us God communicates himself to his world: that is why we are made in his image, however partially we may embody what is truly divine.

Part of being human, therefore, is the capacity to recognise the image of God in other humans, so that we can build up a true knowledge of the author of so much that is true and beautiful.

Hosea is a prophet who was called into being in a world where the people of God had abandoned their faith. I think you can immediately feel a sense of affinity with him. But God commanded a very strange way of life for Hosea: he told him

*Go, marry a whore, and have children with a whore.
For this people has become nothing but a whore, in abandoning its God*

We are all called to love one another, but this is a difficult path to choose - and there is a great deal in our constitution which would warn us against doing it. Hosea realises that if his married life is going to be a disaster, so will his parenthood be a disaster; and so it happens; his prophecy depicts the love of God for a faithless Israel through the heartbreaking he himself endures as husband of a faithless woman. Hosea's message is not just a communication from God; it is a message of holiness that was paid for by his own suffering. In this the prophet prefigures the One who was to come, who would love his weak and unworthy disciples, and the queuing multitudes who came to him with their woes.

As we contemplate these people, and as we come to terms with our own burdens, we should see the way in which Hosea confronted his desolation; he sought the meanings in his own pain that made it match the story of salvation; he tried to imagine sharing his wife's desert as if it were the desert of the exodus, the wilderness experience where Israel slowly learned to belong to God, and to leave behind the low instincts of the slavery they had endured in Egypt. So we should seek for the rebirth God promises, a re-making of people who will live no longer for themselves but for him: may he take us by the hand, and call us by our name, and raise us to new life.