

SERMON: 4 August 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“Coming Home”
(Hosea 11:1—11 and Colossians 3:1-11)**

‘And I will bring them home again, says the Lord’ (Hosea 11:11).

There’s nothing quite like coming home. Whether its at the end of a long day or whether its after having been away for a week, sleeping in a strange bed which is usually never as comfortable as the one you’re used to at home.

For most of us, the notion of coming home is a positive image. Home baking, home cooking, home made things usually taste better or are more appreciated. Like the scribbled hand made birthday card you get from small children.

Which is why the image of God bringing his people home is for most a powerful image which speaks warmly to us.

So do we need to have spent time away from home in order to fully appreciate what home means?

Maybe. Maybe yes, because all of us will have had times when we felt far from home and maybe longed for it.

And thinking of coming home in the Biblical sense of being aware of the presence of God, most of us will probably be able to recall a time when we didn’t feel close to God or we didn’t know God in the way we might have done. And maybe having that experience of distance has made us appreciate being closer to God, as a sort of home coming.

So maybe yes we do need to have spent time away from home in order to fully appreciate what home means.

Although I believe God made us to never be away from God’s presence, even Jesus experienced time away from God in the sense that in coming to save the world he went through every experience of desert or exile that a person could possibly experience. He went through what people go through in order to lead people back home.

As someone once said, Jesus didn't come to start a new religion, he came to reveal the presence of God in all of us. We might say he came to lead us home, and to do so together.

The people of Israel had wandered from home in the past. They'd turned their backs on God. They became slaves in Egypt and God freed them leading them into a land of freedom to begin again. But it didn't last long before they were off again. Away from home, seeking other gods, looking for pleasures in empty practises, modelling their lives on others who seemed to have it all rather than having the courage to be themselves.

They forgot to love their God and their neighbour as themselves. They neglected to look after widows and orphans. They stopped welcoming and providing for the foreigners living among them. They stopped forgiving debts as the Law demanded. They held on to grudges. They even practised slavery themselves, in what became a very divided society of unequal wealth and unfair income distribution.

In many ways things back then haven't changed very much today.

I was looking at the UK Home Office Immigration statistics this week. In 2012 it took an average of 6 years for a foreigner to apply for citizenship to the UK. The process has got harder and it now takes on average 10 years. It's also got much more expensive. In the last 5 years the cost to apply for citizenship has jumped from £600 to over £2,000. Our UK government is not making it easy for foreigners to make their home here.

And I think how we treat foreigners living among us is probably quite a good indicator of what sort of society we're making, as it was back then.

In times of unequal wealth and unfair income distribution, like the times in which Hosea lived, God does not sit back and watch it unfold. God sends messengers. Hosea, (whose name means 'he saves, from which we get the name Jesus) is one of the prophets sent by God to speak truth to power, to bring the word of God into the midst of the idolatry.

We might ask, where are the prophetic voices today? And I think the answer would be that they are there, they maybe need to be a bit louder. Maybe we need to listen well to what God is saying to us and be prepared to add our own voice to where its needed.

But let's look at the content of Hosea the prophet's message. Hosea's message tells God's people [1] who they truly are and where they came

from [2] points out the error of their ways [3] tells them what will happen in order for things to be made right [4] assures them of how God feels towards them - how can I give you up, Israel? (11:8).

Any prophetic message we choose to give voice to needs to have that same sort of balance of truth telling in love. It needs to be Good News. It needs to make people want to come home.

Hosea speaks of a day coming when God's people will find healing from their idolatry and faithlessness and where God's love would know no bounds (14:4) as God's people return to the safety of their own land (14:7).

The New Testament's claim of people being raised to new life with Christ is surely the fulfilment of this desire of God's. The heaven scented images that Paul writes about is the ultimate picture of home coming that resonates with everything good in God's word.

The journey home involves dying on the way - putting to death of the sinful, earthly things that lurk within - sexual sin, impurity, lust, shameful desires, greed, anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, dirty language and telling lies - and instead, putting on the new nature that is continually being renewed as we learn more and more about Christ, who has given us this new nature within.

This new nature of Christ in us, is our new home. It's where we need to live from now on.

Because Paul in the letter to the Colossians goes on to tell us that when we put on this new nature love will flow freely, as will mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and the ability to forgive others who've offended us, and peace will reign in our hearts.

That's what true home coming feels like.

Dr Diana Hayes is a professor of systematic theology at Georgetown University. Here's something she's written about coming home.

"We are not alone in this world, nor have we ever been, no matter how much we may feel otherwise. Many have come before us and will come after us feeling the same way, seeking as we are, searching for the "light." And it is in coming together—one by one, two by two, and on and on—that we form the converging tributaries that make up the mighty

stream of just and righteous people flowing home to God. We are and can be that justice that “rolls down like water,” and that righteousness that “flows like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24).

This is our calling as Christian faithful: to recognise the Christ in everyone. And to reach out a hand of hope, to speak a word of love, to sing a song of happiness, to share a tear of joy or pain, to speak a word of praise, to murmur a prayer, to stand together against those forces that would divide us, isolate us, and block our flow toward home.

We must seek to become the righteous of God, recognising that the path is neither short nor easy, but rock-strewn, obstacle-laden, sometimes even seeming to flow backwards and uphill! But as the prophet Micah proclaims:

You have been told . . . what is good
And what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do the right and to love goodness,
And to walk humbly with your God. (6:8)”

Some of us will be feeling already very much at home. Maybe others might be feeling far from home at the moment. So how do we get home?

Well like any journey it starts with one small simple step in the right direction. A simple ‘yes Lord’ is all that’s needed. Yes Lord I accept the offer to come home. Here I am, I empty myself so as to receive all you want to give me. Speak Lord, your servant is listening. Show me the Way back to you. Show me the Way home.

And if we wait long enough for the Divine Whisper to come, God’s presence in us will be the assurance that our lives are changing and we’re being led in the way of righteousness and peace. We’ll be able to accept ourselves as who we are and be able to welcome others into our midst as if we were welcoming them into our own homes.

God’s house has many rooms. It’s a place of infinite, joyful hospitality where there is room for all to live together in safety forever.

Home is where family belong together. Home is where family gather, grow together, learn together, eat together, talk together, laugh together, cry together, rest together, recover together. God is bringing people

together, creating family, where love can dwell at the heart in the new way of being together that we know to be Christ.

Let me finish with the words of that new hymn which we'll sing in a minute,

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive; built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions; all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Loving Father, thank you that you sent Jesus to reveal God's presence in all of us. Thank you that we can feel at home with that presence to guard us and guide us. By your heavenly grace may we rejoice in our home coming and may we, together, help others to find the way home too.