

Hosea 11:1-11

Father, hear us, we are praying.
Hear the words our hearts are saying.
We are praying for our children.

Keep them from the powers of evil,
From the secret, hidden peril.
Father, hear us for our children.

From the worldling's hollow gladness,
From the sting of faithless sadness,
Father, Father, keep our children.

Through life's troubled waters steer them.
Through life's bitter battles cheer them.
Father, Father, be thou near them.

And wherever they may bide,
Lead them home at eventide.¹

These beautiful, poignant words were written
by Amy Carmichael, who lived most of her

¹ Amy Carmichael

life in India, serving God as a missionary. She was born in Millisle, a little village, just a few miles from where I come from in Ireland. After many remarkable years of sacrificial service in India, she was bedridden for the last twenty years of her life but she remained in India throughout her incapacity with her people. She wrote countless books lying in her bed.

She died in India in 1951 at the age of 83. She asked that no stone be put over her grave at Dohnavur. Instead, the children she had cared for put a bird bath over it with

the single inscription "Amma", which means 'mother' in the Tamil language. She was a true mother to them all; nurturing, caring and inspiring.

I wonder if you have a family photograph album or albums at home. The younger generations of mums and dads probably don't because with the advent of digital photography, photos tend to be stored digitally on computers. The best of the photos will, of course, be printed and displayed at home, but most will lie unseen in a hard-drive. But the older generations of mums and dads will probably still have the

albums. When my mother and father were preparing for their house move recently out came the albums from dear knows when! They were downsizing and so there was a cull of the photographs. The ones that myself and my sister wanted were given to us and the rest were disposed of. But it gave us all a good laugh to see some of us with hair and others with different hair styles and all the changes through the years of growing up. Mums and dads remember what the children have no memory of. The first words - the first faltering steps - the tears and tantrums - the quest for independence with the

skinned knees and joyful discoveries and all the rest. Photo albums can bring those memories back maybe with a wee tear in the eye.

We have the equivalent of God's family photo album, in written, descriptive text in Hosea 11. These are God's memories of his son, his people Israel, sometimes referred to as Ephraim in the passage. God's memories that Israel has no memory of. Tender, poignant memories, yet laced with stark realism. The youth had gone astray and left the parent heartbroken. I'm aware that God's story may be uncomfortably close to

our own. Family relationships do break down and that always causes heartache; with time for all the parties concerned. Some of you will have journeyed to dark places in this respect and you may still find yourself there. God knows - he does as this passage in Hosea reveals.

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge once had a discussion with a man who argued that children should not be given any religious training, but should be free to choose their own faith when they were old enough to decide for themselves. Coleridge later invited him into his garden. It seems our Mr

Coleridge was a great poet but not a great gardener. “Do you call this a garden?” the visitor asked. “There are nothing but weeds here!”

“Well, you see,” Coleridge replied, “I did not wish to infringe upon the liberty of the garden in any way. I was just giving the garden a chance to express itself.”²

The reality is - whether training or guidance is given, or not - people will follow their hearts.

God accused his son, Israel of idolatry. Sometimes we reduce that accusation to the

² Daily Walk, March 28, 1992

worship of statues of stone or bronze or whatever and that has nothing to do with the root of idolatry. Idolatry is the raising of 'things', whatever those things might be, to the ultimate.

Hideyoshi, a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan in the late 1500s, commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took 50,000 men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine crashing down and wrecked the statue. In a rage Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus. "I put you

here at great expense," he shouted, "and you can't even look after your own temple."

God could accuse Hideyoshi of the same thing. I have put you, Hideyoshi, here, at great expense and you cannot even care for yourself.³

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen retells a tale from ancient India: Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned.

"I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some

³ Today in the Word, MBI, August, 1991, p. 23.

creature and create the flesh that goes with it."

"I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones."

The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair."

"And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete."

Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialities. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added

flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle. We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. Goals and dreams can consume us. Possessions and property can turn and destroy us.⁴

But God won't. We are told that he roars like a lion and we, instead of being eaten, will come trembling from the west to be returned

⁴ Nouwen, Henri 1979 *The Wounded Healer* New York: Image Books

to our homes in peace. The wrath of God -
the judgement of God - is not unto
destruction but for restoration. The same as
the parent who takes down the photo album
and remembers. Through all the emotions,
for most, it is love that remains. So much
more so for our God. Amen.

