

# A Word from the Prophet – Hosea

Today, we consider Hosea. The prophet of the love of God.

The Book of Hosea is a great Tragedy. It is a Book of anguish, grief and sorrow. The anguish and the grief are in the heart of God. Hosea tells us of the nature of God, by showing us this sorrow. The revelation of God's nature this Book contains is that He is unconditional in His love for faithless, unbelieving people. In terms of the history of theological thinking, we encounter here, for the first time in our Biblical revelation, the Father's love.

Hosea is famously the prophet who uses the imagery of prostitution to portray his people's fractured relationship with God. He speaks of his nation as a whore. I promise not to overuse that word. But we do need to translate the Hebrew word correctly.

As we look at his Book, let's note the names Hosea uses for his people. He uses three names, but he is always referring to the same community : Israel, the northern kingdom. He uses the names Ephraim, Samaria, and Jacob. Ephraim is the top tribe of the ten who are Israel. Samaria is Israel's capital city. Jacob is of course the patriarch from whom all the tribes claimed descent.

## The messages of Hosea :

### 1. Judgement is coming upon Israel.

- Hosea gets married and his second child is a little girl. Named "Not pitied". (1 v 6-7) Hosea's use of his children breaks your heart. But this is not callous. Hosea is no less in love with his children than any other bloke. Hosea is grieving. He understands that the heart of God is breaking. The message is unambiguous: in the destruction to come, there will be no pity. Not even for children. The child becomes a living parable.
- Child three comes. This little one is named "Not my people". (1 v 8-9) " .... *For you are not my people and I am not your God.*" Where now the promises of the Covenant? Of the Promised Land? Of the commitment to the children of Abraham? Where, indeed! Because, note the finality: I am not your God.
- The judgement is military conquest. Hosea could see the conquest coming: "*Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria.*" The suggestion there of exile, notice. And again, "*Assyria shall be their King.*" (11 v 5) "*The sword shall rage against their cities.... And devour them in their fortresses.*" (11 v 6)
- To the Hebrew, as you will know, sons were necessary and cherished. "*Lo, Sons are a heritage from the Lord*" (Psalm 127 v 3) "*Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them*". But Hosea says "*Ephraim's sons are destined for a prey; Ephraim must lead forth his sons to slaughter.*" (9 v 13) "*I will kill their beloved children*" (9 v 16)
- And the Israelites must be under no illusions. The destructive judgement that is coming is from God. "*I am the Lord your God from*

*the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and beside me there is no saviour.” (13 v 4)*

## **2. Israel is unfaithful.**

So, why the judgement, the awful destruction? Israel is unfaithful. Hosea uses the analogy of the bond between husband and wife. God is the faithful, caring partner, the provider and unconditional lover. Israel is a faithless, adulterous partner. To make his point, Hosea takes a wife. This he knows will end in his own abandonment. (1 v 2-3) But the point was made. *“Rejoice not, O Israel..... for you have played the harlot, forsaking your God.” (9 v 1(a))* The image is enlarged upon (2) and the parable apparently repeated: *“Go again, love a woman who .... is an adulteress ..... so, I brought her for fifteen shekels of silver ....” (3 v 1-2)*

## **3. What is it that Israel is unfaithful to?**

- *“Set the trumpet to your lips, for a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my law ..... Israel has spurned the good.” (8 v 1-2)* Again, as we saw with Amos, God is conceived by Hosea as saying ‘our Covenant says: ‘you be my people, I am your God. But I am good, therefore you must be good. What is it to be good? I give you the law’. So the Covenant relationship requires *right* behaviour. Israel has not delivered this.
- Perhaps it is even deeper than that for Hosea: *“For Israel has forgotten his Maker...” (8 v 14)*
- But it is undeniable and indeed fundamental that the Covenanted People had no other God. *“You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20 v 3)* This was the very essence of the Covenanted relationship. But look at what Hosea says - *“My people inquire of a thing of wood, ..... they sacrifice on the tops of mountains and make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good” (4 v 12-13).* (A terebinth is a sort of tree.) *“They turn to Baal” (7 v 16) “With silver and gold they made idols .... I have spurned your calf, O Samaria my anger burns.” (8 v 4-5) “They .... consecrate themselves to Baal” (9 v 10) “The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Bethaven ....” (10 v 5)* So, there was actual worship of other deities than God: an idol made of wood, odd spirits of nature encountered on hilltops and in trees, that old opponent Baal, the lascivious god of Canaan, and even an image of a calf. (We recall the golden calf in the Exodus 32.) What seems to have happened is that the God of the Exodus has, once the Promised Land is safely reached, become just like the gods of the land, the Baals, linked exclusively with the fertility of the ground. Exclusively, because there is no link between these religious rites and morality, ethics, behaviour.
- Throughout the Old Testament the prophetic cry is against getting involved with the neighbours in military alliances. When the Assyrian Empire came looming over the western edge of the Fertile Crescent, off went ambassadors from Samaria to Egypt, to .... everywhere, I expect. Not least in appeasement to Nineveh itself. (5 v 12) *“Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria” (7 v 11) “You have trusted in your chariots and in the*

*multitude of your warriors*". (10 v 13) The sign of foreign alliance was that you gave your allies' gods a niche in your own pantheon. King Ahab, you will remember married a foreign wife and she brought Baal into Samaria. (2Kings 9) Jezebel had brought an alliance with her, but she brought her gods too. That's the reason the Prophetic revolution took place. Now, Hosea sees the same deterioration: trust in the Lord, he says, trust in the Lord alone. Judgement therefore comes because this worshipping of foreign odd deities goes on unchallenged. It is apostasy at national level.

- Reading Hosea, I think this is Israel's chief error. It upstages the ethical issue, that their religion brings no good behaviour. Although that is there - "*Return O Israel to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.*" (14 v 1) What is iniquitous? Hosea identifies: *swearing, lying, killing, stealing, adultery, use of prostitutes, removing landmarks, oppression, crushing in judgement, robbery, dealing falsely, treachery.*
- What about the first child of Hosea's marriage? Child one is named, Jezreel. (1 v 4-5) Jezreel was the city where Jehu had made himself king of Israel. (2Kings 9) Hosea is reminding the Israelites that Jezreel was the foundation of their current ruling house. And Hosea is saying that monarchs are a human creation, and no one should trust them to deliver the people from what is to come. "*Samaria's King shall perish, like a wood chip on the face of the waters.*" (10 v 7) These holy anointed kings were the leaders, the movers and shakers of their society. They should have made a better job at guiding Israel, says Hosea.

### **Christian teaching**

Let us try to reap the harvest of Hosea for us as Christians.

First, as we've noted before – maybe obvious, but I'll restate it – this Prophet Hosea knows the behaviour God wants from us. God is grieved by human sin. Grieved to the point of a breaking heart. Be righteous. The Christian faith divorced from loving actions is sterile.

Second, see Hosea as innovative. Look at the character of God he reveals. Here for the first time in human history, we see God as our Father. Here for the first time the family is used as the medium to describe our relationship with God. God's longing for us is seen in family terms. So, hearing Hosea, Hebrew theology for the first time began to see the relationship as father and child. This was something understood by almost everyone. If you are lucky enough to have one, love for your child is the experience of every father and mother. We see God the Father beginning to peep out from behind the "Lord of Hosts". Or, if it is easier to grasp, see the emergence in Hosea of God as a loving mother.

I think that the Hebrews of Hosea's time were used to worshipping a being that provided for the fertility of their soil, and their flocks. It looks from Hosea as if they had acquired ideas about that worship from the Canaanites, the people they had displaced or now dominated in the Promised Land. So, the

worship for at least some of them was all about sex and copulation. Now look how Hosea takes that idea, and inverts it. God is the husband, yes, but not in possession of his partner: He is grieving for his lost love. God and Israel could be lovers. Israel was walking away. (repeat) God and the church can be lovers. Where is the church going? We talk about the church as The Bride of Christ. *“And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband ...”* (Rev 21 v 2) And again, St Paul says, *“husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church”*, (Ephesians 5 v 22 -26) So the point is this. Let the words of Hosea challenge us to seek always the confidence of God, to walk beside him as faithful partners. As individuals, sin seduces us away, and God grieves. Be in no doubt, God grieves. How much pain do I cause in the heart of God? This is the question Thomas a Kempis urges us to ask ourselves. It is time for “amendment of life”, as the Prayer Book phrases it.

As a collective, as the church, what does God make of us as his partner? One of the lovely things about us – this congregation – is that we only have to be concerned with us – Wade Street Church. We do watch for opportunities to serve, I think. We ask ourselves fairly frequently, whether we do move “outwards in care, concern and evangelism”. But whether we truly partner God as a church depends, does it not, upon us as individuals. Our own contribution. I know I do not do enough towards that. How about you? Have we given to the partnership the devotion it asks?

Hosea teaches us of **the unconditional nature of God’s love**. It is a love of a parent for their child. But, of course, even as I say those words, I think how inadequate are they. God’s love is greater, more intense, more overwhelming than any human love can be. Nonetheless, we approach it most nearly as we give unconditional love to our children. However old they may currently be. Some of the most heart wrenching of Hosea’s oracles are these *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (A reference there to the Exodus.) “The more I called them, the more they kept from me.....Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms..”* (11 v 1-3) William Neil says, “Hosea has a sympathy and tenderness and it is this that leads him to see that the ultimate truth about God is ... His infinite love”.

**God is mercy.** Hosea tells us that God’s plan includes Restoration. *“I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike root as the poplar; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden.”* (14 v 4-7) And Restoration means complete forgiveness :*“And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me my husband.... And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness: and you shall know the Lord.”* (2 v 16-20) The

relationship is restored. The marriage bond is restored. St Paul took the point. In Romans 9, he quotes Hosea. He is talking about the new life in the Holy Spirit, the new Covenant of Christ. He makes reference to the names of Hosea's children. All mankind is potentially embraced within this new marriage to God, including those hitherto thought excluded, "*Those who were not my people, I will call my people; and her who was not beloved, I will call my beloved.*" (Romans 9 v 25) (cf Hosea 2 v 23)

Then Hosea tells us that God expects Hope. "*So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice and wait continually for your God.*" (12 v 6) In elevating Love as the greater, St Paul also presents Hope as a virtue. To be cultivated by us as Christians. Bible hope is not some wishy-washy thinking that things will get better: it is a veritable certainty – a certainty that you can build your life on. It is a certainty that God reigns, and that our Saviour Jesus is enthroned in power at God's right hand. Whatever life throws at us, the eternal almighty power of God's Love is triumphing. That is, it is triumphant now. That is our hope. That was Hosea's message as he awaited Israel's destruction.

Lastly, I think there is teaching here about Christian sexual behaviour.

- first that God is certainly grieved by the use of prostitutes, which creates prostitution. Hosea's use of the analogy of Israel's harlotry makes that point emphatically.
- On Christian marriage, Hosea is not ambivalent either. Only the tightest bond of self-sacrifice will do. Only self-less devotion. A passion for truth. God is heart-broken at unfaithfulness. God is grieved by unfaithfulness within marriage, by the grief and anxiety that creates. It is not his way. And the way God wants it done is that there are three in the partnership, because He Himself is to be bound into the union in the person of Jesus.
- But note that nothing Hosea says, or I have added, says that to be close to God you have to be married. Or have a lover.

## **Conclusion**

Because of his obscurity, because of his uncomfortable parables, Hosea can be difficult. But he is great. You have to see him as fearlessly and innovatively talking about God as Love. And he is doing that when the Chosen People are facing disaster. Think on that. God is Love. His people need to know that God is Love because death, privation, imprisonment, exile are coming. This is a Prophet who will understand that, faced with death and suffering, you hold up to the world a suffering Saviour. As we hold up the crucified Jesus. No more than Hosea, do we have any complete answer, except that God redeems through the suffering. The whole world is redeemed by the death of our Jesus. Our vocation is to share that. I do not think we would grasp that if Hosea had not prepared Peter and Paul to receive that truth.

Let us leave to Hosea himself the last word. After the disaster, after the dust of it has settled, a farmer takes his plough and begins work on new virgin soil. And this is Hosea's final benediction. This is what he wishes for Israel. "Sow

*for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of steadfast love; break up your fallow ground for it is time to seek the Lord, that He may come, and rain salvation upon you". (10 v 12) That is my prayer too for you. For you as individuals, and for this community of Wade Street Church.*

*Wade Street Church  
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