

## **“JUSTICE & GRACE 8”**

### **Blessings Ahead**

#### ***Hosea 14:1-9***

Well, we've got to the end of this little book of prophecies. You'll remember that this old Hebrew prophet, Hosea, had been called by God to marry a prostitute as a kind of acted parable of the way in which Israel (or Ephraim, as he often refers to them) had been unfaithful to God by constantly ignoring him in favour of other gods and idols. Having once been so close to God and so blessed by him, they had forgotten just how much he loved them, and when he had tried to remind them, they had ignored him and wandered off to see what other gods and idols had to offer them. In many ways it has been a gloomy read – and all the more so as we have been able to see very clear parallels between the actions and attitudes of Israel centuries ago and the ways in which we respond to God today.

So, to lighten the tone a little as we go into this last refection on Hosea's words, I'd like to read a short passage from one of the books which held me spellbound as a child and which I still enjoy today (and there will be a bit more this afternoon for those who are coming along). It sounds so much better when Alan Bennett reads it, but we couldn't get him here this morning, so you'll have to put up with my voice. It's from Kenneth Grahame's classic *The Wind In The Willows*. Mole, one of the main characters, left his home during his spring cleaning, looking for adventure and excitement. He has various adventures with Ratty and Mr Toad. He meets Mr Badger and spends a lot of time with Ratty until one evening, later in the year, he is walking along through the snow and this happens. Together with the chapter *The Piper At The Gates of Dawn* (and you always thought that was just a Pink Floyd album), this is one of the most wonderful bits of writing in the book. Listen to this with the words of Hosea also in the back of your mind. (*Dulce Domum* p99f)

The call of home is always a strong one, isn't it? When you're away on holiday or on business, there's a that desire to get back to comfortable routines and familiar surroundings (at least, there is for me). And going back to your childhood home after a long time away can awaken similar emotions in some of us. Here the prophet Hosea is calling on the people of Israel to do just that in this last chapter of his prophecy. He begins the epilogue to the book, which brings together the main themes of his preaching, with the words, "*Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God*". J B Phillips, in his translation, finds just the right words when he renders it "*But come home, Israel, come home to the LORD your God.*"

These people, to whom he is preaching God's word, have been off worshipping and prostituting themselves before other gods and other idols. They have been seeking security in alliances with other powers. They have neglected their God – the one who has done so much for them in the past. They have strayed away, as God complains in *11:2* – "*But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images*". Now God is calling them home again, home to the place they have known, home to the blessing and security of his loving arms.

They are words that are reminiscent of the parable of the Prodigal Son, which we read in *Luke 15*. After rebellion and selfishness there is the recognition of just how far they have strayed from the safety and comfort of God's love. And, as with the rest of this book, they are words which continue to speak to God's people today, calling us back from our own plans and projects, from our ignorance and neglect of God, from our arrogance and complacency to the loving embrace of Father God.

It involves a recognition of sin, the sin that, as the *Good News Bible* translates it, "*has made you stumble and fall*". The reason you're in this mess and so far from God, says Hosea, is that you have sinned. It's easy to blame God: it's easy to blame other people – to say that you've been let down, that you haven't had the care and attention you feel you should have had, that God hasn't been speaking to you – all kinds of things. But

Hosea is quite clear – your own sins have been your downfall. You will never get back to God without that recognition of your own sin, without a sense of your own wrongdoing. There really is no-one else to blame.

You see, when God created this amazing universe and, tucked away amongst the stars and galaxies and nebulae and solar systems, this little world we call Earth – and when he created human beings and set us down in this astonishing creation, he made a home for us. It wasn't simply somewhere to live, it was a whole network of relationships – with God, with each other, with the creation around us. It was peaceable and fulfilling and satisfying in every way. God surrounded us with his love – making the first move, as we saw last week. It was home, where we were meant to be, where God had provided everything to make life comfortable and meaningful. And that sense of being at home with God is hard-wired into all of us: the preacher in *Ecclesiastes* says that “*God has set eternity in the hearts of us all*”.

And then, of course, evil somehow got into this world and things started to go wrong. Men and women forgot that God had their best interests at heart and began to move away from him. They started to use the freedom he had given them to make wrong choices, wrong decisions – to wander off in the wrong direction. Instead of loving God, they feared him and hid from him. Instead of doing what God said – because, after all, he made the world so he knew how it would best operate so that people could be fulfilled and satisfied – they did what they thought would be best. Instead of helping God to steward, to manage this world so that it all worked smoothly as he wanted, they plundered it and pillaged it for their own short-term gain. Instead of love and care for one another, violence and selfishness became the hall-marks of humanity.

That has continued down through the millennia. God gave us laws to help us get the best out of it all, but they were discarded and ignored. He sent prophets and preachers to remind people of his love and his desire that we should return to him, to return home, but those prophets and preachers were pilloried, persecuted and, as Steve Turner memorably put it in one of his poems, “*put in perspective*”. Finally, he sent his Son, Jesus, to teach us, to set an example, to show us what life could be like with God, following his ways – in his Kingdom, if you like. He healed the sick, comforted the distressed, brought hope to the hopeless and dignity to the downtrodden and disadvantaged, showed love to those whom no-one else wanted to love.

And for all that, Jesus ended up being executed on the lonely hill outside Jerusalem, nailed naked to a rough wooden cross by people who simply had no idea who he was or what he was trying to do. And in that moment of death, as God hung dying on the cross, all the evil in the world was concentrated on him and defeated by his astonishing love. The hold which evil had over humanity was broken and we were given the opportunity to return home, to seek God again. And when, a couple of days later, Jesus burst out of the tomb where the powers of evil finally believed they had confined him, he demonstrated that God's promises could be depended upon and showed us all that there was, indeed, hope for the eternal future.

Maybe you find life frustrating and dissatisfying. Maybe you have a sense that there should be something more. Maybe you feel, deep down inside, that there must be more to life than what you're experiencing at the moment. Maybe you feel that you have no hope, no purpose. It's because you are far from home. You are not where God wants you to be. You are not enjoying the comfort and peace and hope and love that God longs – longs – to lavish on you. “*Come home, come home to the LORD your God.*” Turn back to him, as Hosea encouraged the people of Israel to do. Come home.

Hosea continues in the next verse, “*Take words with you and return to the LORD.*” Those who approached God in Hosea's day had to take something with them – a sacrifice, an offering (look at *Exodus 23:15; 34:20*). But here, once again, the people are being told by one of God's prophets that sacrifices alone are worthless. They must be offered with the right attitude and, here, with the right words. Words of repentance are what God requires of his people. Simply recognising the problem was not enough – *is* not enough – that issue needs to be dealt with in an attitude of true repentance, a wholehearted desire to give up the things you have been relying on, to give up trying to do stuff your own way, with no reference whatsoever to the God

who made you and knows just what is best for you. As we come before God and say to him *“Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips”*, we can have the assurance that our prayer will be heard and answered.

And here those sins are actually confessed: the people are to recognise the specific wrongs that they have committed. They have relied on other pagan powers (*“Assyria cannot save us”*). They have relied on their own strength (*“We will not mount war-horses”*). They have worshipped other gods but found them wanting in terms of love and compassion. Can you spot particular sins in your own life? Maybe they correspond to the sins of Israel. Or maybe they are other problems. Whatever they are, you need to recognise them as sins, repent of them and turn back to God. Come home to his love.

Then, says God through his servant Hosea, there will be great blessing for you. These are timeless blessings which God’s people can look forward to as they come home to the God whom they have known in the past and who has never stopped loving them. God will bring healing from their desire to wander away from him and will continue to *“love them freely”*. The anger, which we have seen expressed so forcibly in the earlier chapters of this book, will be turned away from them. Then there is this wonderful set of horticultural images, pictures of fertility and fecundity, engaging all the senses – grain, wine and olives to eat; shade to rest under; beauty to see, the fragrance of cedar to smell: the dew for refreshment (this isn’t mentioned here as it was in 6:4 to express transience and fickleness, but to emphasise the refreshing of God).

In all of this there is the promise that it will last – this is no passing phase. Look at the way in which God speaks of the roots pushing down into the earth, the replenishing of the blessing with the *“young shoots”*, the fruitfulness which will ensure continuity and abundance. This is a passage which doesn’t need to be pulled apart word by word – the overall effect of reading it is to be caught up in the profusion of God’s love. Coming home to God means love in abundance. When I used to go “home”, back to my parents’ house, to the place where I was brought up, one thing I could be sure of is that there would be plenty of everything. There was so much to eat, so many expressions of love, such warmth and abundance. That’s what Hosea is talking about here. Listen to these words again, as if they are addressed just to you (14:4-8 adapted from *The Message*)

*“I will heal your waywardness.  
I will love you lavishly. My anger is played out.  
I will make a fresh start with you.  
You’ll burst into bloom like a crocus in the spring.  
You’ll put down deep oak tree roots,  
you’ll become a forest of oaks!  
You’ll become splendid—like a giant redwood,  
your fragrance like a grove of cedars!  
As you live close to me, you will know my blessing,  
you’ll be blessed and prosper like golden grain.  
Everyone will be talking about you,  
realising that you are a child of God.  
You’re finished with gods that are no-gods.  
From now on I’m the one who answers and satisfies you.  
I am like a luxuriant fruit tree.  
Everything you need is to be found in me.”*

And God wants to show us these blessings – as individuals, as families, as Christians, as a church. The blessings speak of extravagance, of the profligacy of God’s love. Those blessings are waiting for us if only we are prepared to return to the place we know, to the arms of the God who has done so much for us in the past. Come home to the Lord your God – it’s not far away, like Mole’s home, and God is calling you there this morning.

The book ends with a verse that may well have been added by the person who edited Hosea's sermons, or written by the prophet himself to emphasise the message he has delivered. It has been a hard message to preach – there has been rebuke, judgement, pain, heartache. But there have also been expressions of love, of longing, of sorrow on the part of God. J B Phillips puts a little heading over this last verse in his translation – *“The issues are plain for any who would understand.”*

Hosea is quite clear – *“The ways of the LORD are right.”* There is nowhere else to turn for the correct path through this life. The only two alternatives are to follow them or to stumble over them. And the question this book leaves in our minds is precisely that – will you follow the ways of God and receive the wonderful blessings he has for those who do? Or will you try to go your own way, rejecting the paths of God and eventually stumbling over them in your desire to do your own thing? The choice is yours and God is calling you once again today. *“Come home, come home to the LORD your God.”* What God showed us through the life and teaching of Jesus – and then followed up on Good Friday and at Easter – is that he loves us and wants to make it possible for us to enjoy all the benefits of that love. It's where we're meant to be – at home with him.

*“Please stop, Ratty!” pleaded the poor Mole, in anguish of heart. “You don't understand! It's my home, my old home! I've just come across the smell of it and it's close by here, really quite close. And I **must** go to it, I must, I must.”*

(Housegroup notes on next page)

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## **JUSTICE AND GRACE 9**

### **Blessings Ahead**

Hosea 14:1-9

This last chapter is effectively an epilogue to the book. It brings together the main themes of Hosea's preaching and begins with the words "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God". J B Phillips translates it as "But come home, Israel, come home to the LORD your God". The people of Israel have wandered away from their God in all their idolatrous activity, but the only safe and secure place for them to be is where they are intended to be – with God himself. As they have been reminded in 11:2, they have strayed and now it is time to return. The words in 14:2 are very reminiscent of the words used by the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

This return will involve a recognition of their sin – it can be very easy to blame God, other people and circumstances for problems and difficulties, but there is often a need to recognise the ways in which our own choices have led to consequences which we regret. The people of Israel are to return to God "with words" (14:2). They cannot simply offer the usual routine sacrifices and assume that everything will be OK – they need to come with the right attitude and words of repentance. And they need to confess their specific sins – idolatry, reliance on other powers, misplaced confidence in their own strength.

But once they have recognised their sin, returned to God and repented of their actions, there is great blessing in store for them. God will bring healing and continue to "love them freely". His love is described here in a series of horticultural images, pictures of fecundity and fertility. And there is the clear implication that this will all last – it is a picture of the profusion of God's love which is deeply rooted.

The book ends with a comment that, although the issues here have been hard to preach, there is real blessing for those who take seriously the message of Hosea. J B Phillips heads this short section "The issues are plain for any who would understand". The challenge and the choice are as fresh today as they were in Hosea's day.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. In what way could we describe returning to God as "going home"?
2. Confession and repentance are not always core activities in our lives and worship today. Why not?
3. In what ways do we try to avoid accepting responsibility for our own wrongdoing?
4. How do you respond to the images Hosea uses to describe God's love?
5. This book was written many centuries ago – in another place, another culture. How would you try to persuade other people that its message is still very relevant today?
6. Think back over the whole book of Hosea. What has been the most significant thing about it for you?