

**“HOSEA 1 – THE PROPHET & THE PROSTITUTE”**

*Hosea 1:1 – 2:8*

*“Wherever you go, all you hear is blasphemy and swearing. There’s lying and murder and stealing and all kinds of sexual shenanigans. It’s just violence on violence. That’s why this place is in such a state – dying on its feet. Everyone’s given up, really – there’s no enthusiasm for anything any more. Even the wildlife is disappearing.”*

Those words of despair and pessimism about public and private morality, violence, apathy and ecological disaster could quite easily have come from a hand-wringing editorial in the *Daily Mail* or a column in *The Guardian*. They speak of attitudes and actions which are very familiar to us today in western society as we move into the third millennium. Yet they were written – or rather, preached – in the eighth century BC. They were preached to people in a situation where political corruption had become rife – in the lifetime of the preacher there had been six kings, four of whom had come to power by murdering their predecessor; religion had become a meaningless ritual that often involved cultic sexual activity and always involved idolatry; trade and economic activity were shot through with deceit and dishonesty; those who stood for truth were ridiculed and persecuted.

And all this was happening in a nation comprising the only people in the history of the world to have been chosen as special by God, the only nation with a divinely inspired law code, the only nation in the world of whom it could really be said that they knew what they were doing. The message was preached to the people of Israel in the last few years before they were deported *en masse* and exiled for seventy years. And it was preached by an obscure preacher of whom we know no more than his name and his father’s name – **Hosea, son of Beeri**.

This Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah and prophesied about the same time as Amos was preaching in Judah, the Kingdom to the south of Israel which had broken away many years before. Israel was sinking further and further into economic decline, political instability and religious syncretism. Everyone, it seems, from the king to the person in the street, from the priests to the market traders, was involved in some sort of scandal and devoted to some brand of pagan idolatry. And God was not pleased at all – in fact, he calls his people, his chosen people, a bunch of whores. Poor old Hosea was the man chosen and appointed by God to go and convey this harsh message to his compatriots.

And not only was Hosea commanded to preach this message – as was the way with so many of the Old Testament prophets, he had to act it out too. God tells the preacher, in words of the first chapter, to go and marry a woman whom he knows will betray him. Just as God has been betrayed by the people he loves, who have gone off after other gods, so Hosea will be betrayed by a woman whose prostitution will repeatedly mean that he is abandoned for other men. And this adulterous prostitute, called Gomer, bears him two children, to whom Hosea is to give the names *Not Loved* and *Not My People* (*Lo-Ruhamah* in v6 and *Lo-Ammi* in v9). I reckon my children are pretty glad such customs don’t persist today and they ended up being called *Going To Hell* and *Bunch of Pagans!* This whole situation is to be used by God to convey to his people something of his message of judgement and restoration .

So often in the books of the prophets towards the end of the Old Testament God uses this idea of love and rejection to describe his relationship with his people. The most powerful and moving example is probably in *Ezekiel 16* – read it when you get home (it’s a bit too long to read in full this morning) and you might begin to grasp something of God’s longing for his people. Here in *Hosea* we can glimpse something of the depth of sorrow that God feels when confronted with the unfaithfulness of his chosen people. As we work our way through the book, we’ll see a bit more of that in detail. Indeed, you might like to read all the way through the book in one go during the week to get a feel for the overall message. And if you want to discuss further some of the issues which are raised in these morning services you could go along to one of the house groups that is using this material during the week. (There’s a copy of the sermon and discussion notes on the church website.)

Anyway, the message of the book is one of judgment. Most of the prophecy is taken up with the theme of God's justice and wrath. God, through the words he gives Hosea to speak, fulminates against his chosen people, warning them of what is to come, pleading with them to repent, driving home the message with all kinds of descriptions of their behaviour (as we shall see). Yet, through it all, there shines the glimmer of salvation, a ray of hope that God will once again bless his people. He loves them too much for his anger to last for ever. So, after they have been punished, he will demonstrate the scope of his great love again. There are some wonderful passages which deal with the grace of God which stand out, even from the rest of Scripture, in these chapters.

The prophecy, as we have it, is rather bitty. The first three chapters refer, as we've already mentioned, to this kind of acted parable which likens Hosea's relationship with his adulterous wife to God's relationship with his unfaithful people. But from chapter four onwards, although there is a very strong thread of continuity, it's all very broken up. One early scholar, Jerome, said that it was almost as if he was "*preaching it sentence by sentence*", making it up as he goes along. Part of the trouble is perhaps the fact that the book of *Hosea* is the most textually difficult to reproduce: some of it is very difficult indeed to translate out of the Hebrew. But we believe that what we have here is God's inspired word, so we can't make that too much of an excuse.

Over the next few weeks we're going to make our way through this book, taking some of the crucial passages and seeing how the things that God said through his prophet to a distant people nearly thirty centuries ago is still actually relevant to us today. We, as God's chosen people, chosen and justified through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, are in a position similar to that of Israel as regards our relationship with God. And the sins of Israel are reproduced and multiplied amongst us today. The message of Hosea is vitally important and I hope we'll take it seriously. If you want to do any more study on it yourselves, I'd recommend Derek Kidner's commentary in *The Bible Speaks Today* series, published by IVP. If you want something a bit heavier, try Douglas Stuart's *Word Biblical Commentary*.

Well, as we've already said, chapter 1 serves as a summarising preface for the whole book. Douglas Stuart writes that "*1:2-9 presents an overview, in stark and moving terms, of the prophet's dominant message: God has given up on his people. The theme of restoration after this judgement then follows immediately (1:10-2:1).*" Those themes will unfold in far more detail as we read through the book, so we're going to concentrate our attention this morning on chapter 2.

Most of this chapter is in the form of a legal speech, similar to the kind of thing many of Hosea's first listeners would have been familiar with if they'd ever been at a legal hearing. It's a kind of "statement for the prosecution", a favourite and effective device of the Hebrew prophets. God is setting the charges against his people. As in the real-life situation in which Hosea found himself – married to an adulteress – God sees his people as being unfaithful to him, her true partner, prostituting herself as she follows the ways of other religions. Today we'll just look at the first few verses of the chapter, which speak of the sin of rejecting God in favour of apparently more material benefits.

In vv2-4, God shows that he really is angry with Israel. He says, in effect, "I no longer consider her to be my wife. Let her wipe that seductive smile from off her face and take off all the adornments that mark her out as a prostitute. If she doesn't, I will strip her naked and embarrass her and humiliate her before everyone else." Basically, Israel has ignored God, neglected him, denied him, rejected him.

That continues to be the case today. Consciously or unconsciously, men and women give God no part in their lives (as we were thinking about last week) – and that can happen even with those people who call themselves Christians. Throughout the ages there have been those who have tried to deny the existence of God. The French Revolutionaries did their best in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and the French nation is still dealing with the legacy of that today, I believe. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people like Friedrich Nietzsche confidently began to proclaim it in their writings. As he wrote in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: "*We have killed God and all Europe is filled with the stench of his rotting corpse.*"

The idea that there is no God has taken root in the minds of many people today, people who label themselves atheists and seem to work with an evangelical zeal to convince others that ideas of the divine are pure fantasy. The populist scientist Richard Dawkins is one among many who do that. But many more people are what we might call “functional atheists” – they don’t really think about it, but behave as if there is no God. But (again, as we saw last week), whenever God is consciously denied or unconsciously not acknowledged, another god must take his place. We humans need some motivating force, something or someone to whom we give allegiance, some reason for living. Bob Dylan, in a song which you may recall Andrew Rushton sang at our thanksgiving service last autumn, wrote “*You gotta serve somebody*”. Hosea puts his finger on it in v5.

## 1. THE TEMPTATION OF MATERIALISM

For many, many people, God seems remote and unable to accomplish anything. You can’t actually see him or hear him or feel him. If you don’t really acknowledge his existence, he doesn’t do anything for you either. So you reach out for those things which seem more real, more tangible. Israel was chasing after “*food and water, wool and linen, oil and drink*”. She was falling into the same trap that confronts many people today, perhaps more than ever before – materialism or consumerism. People can’t be bothered to look for the One True God when their time and energy are taken up with money, houses, clothes, consumer goods. These are the things that will bring them immediate happiness. Who cares about God? He’s never given them a car or an i-Pod, he’s never provided them with a house or a plasma screen TV.

And that goes for many so-called Christians too! It’s so much easier to feel secure with the things society tells you that you need than with the simple trust and faith that the Bible says you need. God can wait until the extension’s finished – I can’t really go to church on Sundays because I’ve had to take on an extra job to pay for the second car – I can’t find time to study the Bible because I have to do this study to move upon the promotion ladder at work – my hi-fi’s two years old now and I don’t think it’s honouring to God to play worship CDs on an old system!

It’s all done in the hope that it will bring happiness and security and contentment. For most people that’s all that matters; for Christians it’s something we tack on to the gospel as a kind of insurance clause. It’s a mug’s game chasing after material things – as Hosea says in v7a. It’s all very elusive. Satisfaction is forever just out of reach. As soon as you buy something it’s out of date, obsolete, unfashionable.

## 2. THE TRANSIENCE OF MATERIALISM

God pictures Israel as chasing after these things and finding them elusive. They are never caught, they cannot be found. And so it is with our materialism – it never satisfies. We always want more. A wardrobe full of clothes soon goes out of fashion. A big house or flat is never quite big enough. A car soon becomes too old to be seen in. And the advertisers play on that, don’t they? “*Embarrassed by your mobile ‘phone?’*”

And there’s no real security in any of it, not in the long run. Look at the parable of the Rich Fool in *Luke 12:16-21* or at Jesus’ words in *Matthew 6:19-21*. No lasting happiness suddenly becomes apparent. In fact, more often than not it brings more unhappiness, more anxiety in the form of credit repayments, repair bills, higher insurance premiums, worries about security and crime. Once God is rejected – in favour of whatever other god or idol – the prospects look decidedly bleak. There may be kicks and kudos, but no real, lasting satisfaction.

## 3. THE TRUE SOURCE OF MATERIAL BENEFIT

(As I was preparing this, it became more and more apparent how this fits in with what we were looking at last week when we considered *Deuteronomy 8*.) What grieves God the most, though, is set out in v8. Anything and everything which we have comes in the first instance from God himself, and yet we just don't acknowledge it. And notice that God not only *gives* these things, he "*lavishes*" them on his people. That is a word which is so often used in both the Old and the New Testaments to describe the bounty of God. If we were able to recognise that whatever we have has been given us by God and is evidence of his love, we might begin to discover the secret of contentment of which Paul writes in *Philippians 4:11,12*.

And if we really accepted the full meaning of that, we wouldn't fall into the trap that Israel did of using what God has given for the worship of Ba'al (v8b). If we think in terms a little wider than just tangible material gifts and consider what we do with God's gifts of intellect, talent, education, time, we can see just how easy it is to make those things become tools in the pursuit of other gods – success, power, partners, popularity (even within the church!).

Rejecting God, slapping him in the face and chasing off after other – always elusive – gods (even using what God has given in the worship of them) grieves him and is a sin which God must address. How he does that we shall see next time – but this morning we can be thankful that God never really lets us go: he is always seeking us and trying to draw us back to him.

*(Discussion notes on next page)*

## STUDIES IN HOSEA

### 1. The Prophet & The Prostitute

#### *Hosea 1:1 – 2:8*

*"Wherever you go, all you hear is blasphemy and swearing. There's lying and murder and stealing and all kinds of sexual shenanigans. It's just violence on violence. That's why this place is in such a state – dying on its feet. Everyone's given up, really – there's no enthusiasm for anything any more. Even the wildlife is disappearing."*

It sounds like a letter to *The Times* or an outraged editorial in *The Daily Mail* – crime, apathy, ecological disaster. But those words were written – or rather, preached – in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. They're from the prophecy of Hosea, one of the "Minor Prophets" of the Old Testament (*Hosea 4:2,3*).

Hosea (of whom we know nothing other than his name and his father's name) was a contemporary of Isaiah and Amos, and his message to God's people, who were at that time about as far from God as they could be, was that God was going to judge them for their sinfulness. The message was not only preached, but also acted out as Hosea married a prostitute who was destined to be unfaithful to him. But there would also be grace and, eventually, reconciliation. This little book is a challenge to us today, as we consider our own attitudes and behaviour. But it is also an encouragement as we read of the seemingly limitless love that God has for his people.

In chapter 2, the prophet identifies the root cause of Israel's problem – they have rejected God. But whenever men and women reject God, they find that other "gods" or idols take his place. Here it is materialism that fills the vacuum. Hosea writes of:

#### **1. The Temptation of Materialism**

It always seems more secure to put your trust in what you can see. The "*food and water, wool and linen, oil and drink*" which the people want (*v5*) are substitutes for God, and the desire for them can easily usurp the place of God in our lives today.

#### **2. The Transience of Materialism**

But they are elusive (*v7*). Jesus emphasises that in *Matthew 6:19-21* and tells a parable about their temporary nature in *Luke 12:16-21*. Once God is rejected, we can never really discover lasting satisfaction or fulfilment.

#### **3. The True Source of Material Benefit**

What really grieves God is in *v8*. Everything we have is "*lavished*" on us by God himself, but we so often refuse to recognise that. In fact, we take what he gives us and use it in our worship of other "gods".

### Questions for discussion

1. *2 Kings 2:17:7-20* outlines some of the reasons for God's judgment on his people. What are they? What are their equivalents today?
2. Why is materialism so tempting?
3. Can we avoid materialism completely? Should we? (Look at *1 Timothy 4:4*)
4. How would you respond as a Christian to someone who said it's better to rely on what you can see and touch than on what you can't?
5. In what ways do we "*use for Baal*" the gifts that God lavishes on us?
6. Is the image of God as a spurned husband a helpful one? Why/why not?
7. What's the most important thing for you in this passage?