

“HOSEA 3 – WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?”

Hosea 4,5

It’s good to work systematically through the books of the Bible so that we have some idea of how they fit together and an opportunity to follow their argument through from beginning to end. The only trouble is that we can’t do it all in one go and, in breaking it up, we sometimes come across a passage of pretty well unrelieved gloom. Such is the case this week. There are happier times ahead, although if you’re in church for just this one week, it might seem that we don’t have a terribly optimistic outlook – but there’s also an incentive to come back for the happy ending at some point!

We’ve looked at the first three chapters of this prophecy of Hosea and have seen in them an acted parable of God’s relationship with his people. The prophet, Hosea, has married Gomer, a prostitute, and despite her repeated adultery, he has welcomed her back as his wife, just as God has constantly tried to win back his people, who have been rejecting him for the temporary allure of other, false, gods. In that story there is a kind of summary of the key themes of this book, a sketch of what is to come. And now, in chapter 4, the real fun starts. Through his prophet, God comes out with a damning indictment of the society of the day. In 4:1-3, in the language and style of the law court, God sets out the charge sheet, the case for the prosecution.

Now, this stuff is getting on for 3,000 years old. It is God’s accusation against the people of a minor Middle Eastern state – just a few tribes, in fact – far away from us in history and geography. It’s in language that is stylised and archaic. But it is strangely relevant to the situation in twenty-first century Western Europe – the kind of society and culture that we find ourselves a part of today. And therein lies the genius of this book we call the Bible. Whenever you read it, wherever you read it, it has something to say that is bang up to date. In this case, it’s a stark word of warning, a call to wake up and realise what’s going on around us – and, indeed, the part we play in it all. This is as fresh a critique of human folly as you will find anywhere in the literature of the world. Here is the “problem” with which the people of Hosea’s day have to cope – and here too is the “problem” that confronts us today.

God starts by outlining what is missing from human society – and wherever you look in the history of humanity you’ll find the same symptoms. *“There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land.”* Surely we don’t need this spelling out for us. *“Faithfulness”* is translated elsewhere as *“honesty”* or *“truth”*. Whom can you trust? Everywhere there is deception and corruption of one sort or another – from the government which is *“economic with the truth”* to the advertisers who rely on half-truth and innuendo to sell us products that we really don’t need to the gossips and rumourmongers that infect even the church.

We live in a society where *“love”* has been completely re-interpreted to refer to something that is more akin to lust. The word used here in Hebrew is a word which means *“compassion”*, which has a clear sense of *“covenant”* about it. It speaks of a network of caring relationships, in which the well-being of others is paramount. Community and commonwealth are implied within it. That kind of love is becoming strangely absent in our individualistic, self-aggrandising, materialistic, competitive society, just as it was in the society of Hosea’s day.

And at the root of it is the lack of *“acknowledgment of God”*. God has been pushed not to the sidelines but out of the picture all together. The people of Hosea’s day didn’t want God messing up their corrupt dealings, their oppressive ways, their self-centred schemes. In the book of *Amos* we find the charge that the people couldn’t wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they could get on with the task of fleecing their fellow citizens. We’ve gone one better (or one worse) and don’t even have the constraint of a Sabbath now. God is gone. As Alistair Campbell famously said of Tony Blair, *“We don’t do God”*. In our desperate desire to tolerate everything, we end up tolerating nothing and God disappears with the rest of it. We can do without him. The title of Richard Dawkins’ new book sums it up for many people – God is a *“Delusion”*.

Where those positive aspects of Hosea's society and ours have disappeared, in their place we find the things listed in the next couple of verses, a list of crimes that seem to be, as one commentator puts it, "*a dark shadow of the Ten Commandments*". Even less comment is needed here – these things speak for themselves: "*cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery ... bloodshed follows bloodshed.*" It's a violent, foul-mouthed, promiscuous, duplicitous world in which we live. And if it's not obvious in your street, just pick up a local paper, look at the soaps, go and see the latest offerings at the theatre or the cinema.

As Hosea says, "*they break all bounds*". Boundaries are constantly being pushed back and stepped over, so that they no longer seem like boundaries. It's within my lifetime that critic Kenneth Tynan first used the f-word on television. Most drama and comedy programmes after 9 o'clock are now thought to be incomplete without a torrent of such language. Graphic depictions of sex and violence fill our screens and we rarely bat an eyelid. Writers, artists, film-makers feel it their duty to push back the boundaries – not necessarily to make any point other than that are pushing back the boundaries. Why are we struggling with our teenagers, as we've been hearing this week? Precisely because we have failed to set them legitimate boundaries and encourage them to keep within them.

At the root of all this is a basic human selfishness, an inability to set our own agreed codes of morality because we have dispensed with the God on whom that morality ultimately depends. We want as much as we can get and we want it now. And that affects all creation. The consequences of our greed and cynicism don't just hurt our neighbours, they hurt every part of this creation. There's a sense of gloom and apathy, says Hosea. We live in a cynical, suspicious, critical culture. And the more we've got, the more we moan – just look at the letters page of any of our local newspapers (and, indeed, national ones). It leads to economic ruin and ill-health – "*all who live in the land waste away*". And as for the Stern Report, which was published recently: well, Hosea was there first – "*the beasts of the field and birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying*". There is a link between our rapacious plundering of this world's resources and the gradual wheezing death of the planet. Only a couple of days ago a report was published saying that over-fishing would mean that British and Atlantic fish stocks would be exhausted in forty years.

Derek Kidner, whose commentary on this book we have quoted in previous weeks, writes this:

"If this language leaves out many links in the chain of causation, it is not hard to supply a few of them once one recognises violence, lust and perversion as symptoms of the state of mind that will stop at no restraints and will sacrifice a whole future to the cravings of the moment. Hosea speaks here even more immediately to us, who are approaching the terminal stage of this infection, than to his own generation."

Part of the problem, as Hosea saw it, was a complete lack of moral leadership. Those who should give a lead, who had been appointed by God and entrusted by the people with the oversight and education of the nation – in Hosea's case, the priests – were just as bad as everyone else (vv5-9). They were corruptly abusing their position to feather their own nests and were turning a blind eye to the crimes of others. In fact, they weren't just as bad as the rest, they were worse, because they were betraying the trust of the people whom they were supposed to be leading.

So God allows the people to reap the consequences of their own sin. In 4:10ff we read what happens. They have an insatiable appetite for more – they are never satisfied. So life becomes a constant series of disappointments, an unfulfilled existence. Nothing is ever right. Nothing is ever enough. The continual striving for more, for bigger, for more novel is all-consuming. There's a succinct summary of a consumer culture if ever there was one – three millennia before the phrase "consumer culture" was coined.

Not only that, but they are engaged in "*prostitution*" – both literally and figuratively. There were all kinds of sexual antics which went on in Hosea's time, much of it with the excuse of some kind of

religious observance, believe it or not. But God also used this image to describe his people's constant chasing after other gods. They were breaking their covenant relationship with him in order to get some short-term favour from the so-called gods of the pagans. And that often involved drunkenness and other such things, as Hosea points out in *v11*. Such things "*took away the understanding*" of the people – a bit like drugs and over-indulgence in alcohol do today. They just didn't realise what they were doing after a while. They ended up like the pictures we see in our newspapers and on our television screens of groups of drunken men, women and young people, incapable in the gutter.

But there was a deeper malaise as well: the people had a spiritual emptiness (which is fairly natural if you've pushed God out of the picture) and they attempted to fill this with a variety of counterfeit spiritual practices – occultism, if you like. In *v12* we read of their attempts to find answers by talking to wooden idols and using a divining rod: that's what being "*answered by a stick of wood*" means. As we've said before, you can see such practices today as people turn to all kinds of other flaky religious practices to try and get answers, to try and fill the spiritual void in their lives.

Finally, in this section, as God leaves them to their own devices, Hosea could see hypocrisy in their actions, especially in sexual matters. In *v14* God says that there is no point just punishing the women who became prostitutes and were promiscuous – the men are also to blame. There was a clear double standard here – a double standard that was clear in Jesus' time, too, when the Pharisees brought a woman to be stoned for adultery, but didn't seem to worry too much about the man who must also have been involved. Aren't such double standards still evident in our culture? The very newspapers that complain most loudly about sex offenders and child abusers are the ones which carry photographs of semi-naked women (that's the tabloids) and prurient articles and excerpts from biographies (that's the broadsheets). As we lament the rise in teenage pregnancies and abuse of children, we sexualise our young children through fashion, film and music. It is rank hypocrisy!

And then, in chapter 5, the tone of Hosea's preaching changes. No longer will God simply abandon his people to the consequences of their own actions, but he will actively punish them. He will send his judgement on them and ensure that they pay for their sinfulness. In 5:6 he warns them that he will not only withdraw his favour from them, but will actually withdraw himself. When they do eventually seek God, he threatens not to be there. There are many references in these verses to events and places specific to Hosea's time (a number of in jokes, if you like) but we won't go into all those this morning – suffice it to say that the message would have hit home very hard with these people who had turned away from their God. And even if we don't understand all the references, all the nuances here, we can see that God means business. The message is clear. God's patience is running out and his judgement is going to come in the form of attacks from other nations and tribes.

And the response of the people is not to recognise their sin and their need for repentance, but to form alliances with other nations whom they think will be able to help them out of the mess. In *v13* Ephraim (or Israel) and Judah look to the pagan kings of Assyria for support. But political systems and alliances are worthless if they are seen simply as a substitute for God and his ways. The people of Israel are really only letting themselves in for more trouble by looking to purely human solutions for a problem whose roots are deeply spiritual and moral.

This is a pretty damning indictment of the society of Hosea's day. And as we've seen, it could apply equally to our situation now – and, indeed, any culture and nation down through history. We all have the same fatal flaws in our attempts to build our cultures without reference to God. It's depressing stuff, but eventually the people do turn to God, they do recognise him as a last resort. But they are turning to a God they have marginalised, whom they have tried to ignore and excise from their national life, from their daily existence. Don't we still do it, though? Think of the things that were said after the destruction of the Twin Towers, after the bomb attacks in London. Suddenly, people wanted to pray to a God they'd pushed out of pretty well every area of national life. But why bother praying to God whom you have tried to ignore and reject, a God who has been airbrushed out of political, educational, public life?

The only crumb of comfort seems to be that God is still there to be found. Although he has withdrawn himself from the people, although he has stood aside to let them get on with things their own way, he is still to be sought by those who are truly prepared to return to him. Next time, we'll see how God responds to that cry from his people. There is light at the end of the tunnel, but it's a long dark tunnel and the light is still very dim. I can see ways in which the words of Hosea speak to our generation, to our culture today: these are words which need to be taken seriously, words which we need to proclaim to a society that is sick and dying, a godless, directionless society, wandering around in search of help, but looking in all the wrong places. And we need to acknowledge the part we have played in allowing society to get to this point, not only by not speaking out, but also by allowing our own lives to become practically indistinguishable from the lives of those around who do not believe in God and in the work of his Son Jesus Christ. It is time for us to say, as Hosea did, "Enough is enough – let us return to the Lord." Do we have the courage for that?

Housegroup notes on next page.

STUDIES IN HOSEA

3. What's the problem? *Hosea 4:1-4*

Chapter 4 begins a new section of the prophecy of Hosea. After the first three chapters in which Hosea has used his own personal situation to illustrate God's dealings with his people, Israel, we now move into the second part of the prophecy, in which God's word is conveyed in much greater detail. It begins with a succinct analysis of all that is wrong in Hosea's society – a message which speaks as clearly to us today as it did to the people of Hosea's day.

Firstly, in *v1b*, Hosea outlines the things that are lacking in the land, then he goes on to describe their effects.

1. No faithfulness

Many translations use this word "*faithfulness*", but the words "*truth*" and "*honesty*" which we find in some versions probably convey the meaning best. There is no longer anything that can be depended on in society: truth is distorted and deliberately ignored.

2. No love

Society has become very individualistic, a culture in which everyone looks after his/her own interests, and loses any sense of compassion for the disadvantaged and marginalised.

3. No acknowledgment of God

This is what lies at the root of all the other problems – no-one is prepared to recognise and respect God and his laws. The word "*acknowledgment*" is translated as "*knowledge*" in some versions, which conveys the idea of an intimate relationship of love and surrender.

Hosea then goes on to show what effect such a lack can have on the world.

1. Lawlessness (*v2*)

A society built on selfishness and lacking in love, with no dependable honesty or integrity will soon break down. *James 4:1,2* gives some insight into that. The crimes mentioned in *v2* are a "dark shadow" of the Ten Commandments.

2. Apathy and economic ruin (*v3a*)

It's not long before the whole structure of society comes crashing down. Many people give up and say "Why bother?" Their own immediate context becomes their entire world.

3. Ecological disaster (*v3b*)

When God is ignored, not only does society suffer, but the whole of creation begins to feel the effects of human sinfulness.

Questions for discussion

1. What examples are there in our own society of lack of truth and honesty? How do they affect you personally? Do you feel drawn into that way of thinking and behaving?
2. In what ways should we be showing more love in our society? How can the church become involved in that?
3. Do we need some kind of moral foundation for our society that comes from God, or is it enough just to say that we should "love our neighbour"? (What does that mean, anyway?)
4. Hosea's message seems rather negative and pessimistic. Would it be any different today? (Are things today "worse than they've ever been"?) What do you think is the way out of the situation? What can we, as Christians, do to make a difference?
5. What is the most important thing that you have taken from this passage?