

## **“HOSEA 4 – MERCY NOT SACRIFICE”**

### *Hosea 6:1-10*

Last week’s reflection on this message of Hosea was a pretty depressing experience, really. We were able to see something of the mess the Israel had got into and relate it to what’s going on in our Western European society today. And basically what’s happened is that God has been pushed out beyond the margins – “*there is no acknowledgement of God*” – and with him have gone “*faithfulness*” (or honesty, trust) and “*love*”, a covenantal, compassionate, communitarian love. The void left after we’ve lost those things is filled with all manner of negative things which pretty well consign the morality of the Ten Commandments to the dustbin. Society is sick and dying and that has its effect on the wider creation – and time is short before God acts in judgement on those who have rejected him.

However, towards the end of what we said last week, we caught sight of a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Although God was absent from the experience of his people, he was still there to be found when things go so bad that they were prepared to turn to him as a last resort. In the end, in the time of Hosea, that did happen – and we read about the effects of that in the chapter we’ve just read.

The first three verses of chapter 6 record what the people of Israel said as they decided it was time to give God a try again. They knew that he is a loving God so they think it’s worth having another go at asking him to help them. “OK,” they say, “let’s give God a call and see what he say. A few sacrifices and the odd prayer, and it’ll be alright again in couple of days.” And what they say about God is, of course, true: he is as reliable as the rising sun, he does come to water the land, all that he does is good.

The trouble, though, is not with God. The trouble is with the people themselves. God is like the morning sun, which rises and grows stronger as the day wears on. Israel are like the morning mist that disappears. God is like the rain that sinks into the earth and does it good. Israel are like the dew that lies on the surface for a bit and then evaporates. They come along with their sacrifices and rituals, but they don’t mean anything by them: in fact, they make similar sacrifices to the other gods that they worship as well as the One True God.

What God is saying through Hosea, and what he continues to say in vv7-10, is that the people are fickle and shallow in their response to him. (And, again, there are some puns and in jokes in these few verses that don’t really translate for us today, so I won’t go into them all this morning.) These Israelites are a bit like the kids I used to teach. One week Sharon has got “I love Wayne” all over the front of her pencil case. The next week, there’s a great scab of Tippex on it and “Kevin 4 Sharon” in its place. And where Wayne had scratched “Sharon” on the back of his hand with his compass, he’s now got “Tracey” in its place. It probably all hinged on who had the best sandwiches that week!

The people of Israel are changing the allegiance more often than they changed their sandals, and God is getting a bit fed up with it all. So he sends his prophets to give them a good talking to and to warn them about their attitudes and the consequences if it all. We read in 6:5 that he will “*cut them in pieces with his prophets and kill them with the words of his mouth.*” What God has to say to them really gets under their skin – his words have the power to make them feel really ashamed. We read similar things in *Hebrews 4:12*, where the writer talk about the effect of the Bible on those who read it. It can cause us a great deal of pain when we realise that there are things wrong in our lives, and God’s word can become like the scalpel that cuts out the things that are getting between us and God.

The main thrust of what God is saying to the people through this particular prophet, Hosea, is found in 6:6. God contrasts on what the people think pleases him with what he really does want from them. They have been trotting p to the holy places and making all these sacrifices, but they haven’t actually done anything about putting right their lives. God would much rather have “*mercy*” than “*sacrifice*” and wants all the people to “*acknowledge*” him rather than bringing “*burnt offerings*”. He makes the same point through the other Hebrew prophets whose words we find in our Old Testament. *Isaiah 58* is a

prime example, and we can also read it in *Micah 6:6-8* and *Amos 5:21-24*. God doesn't just want to smell the odd whiff of burning goat or a couple of snorts of incense, while the people go on living the rest of their lives as if he didn't exist the rest of the time – that's not the point of repentance. George Adam Smith puts it like this in his commentary on these verses: “*What could make repentance seem so easy as the belief that forgiveness can be won simply by offering sacrifices.*”

You see, the sacrifices were an outward sign, but, like baptism, they had to be the outward sign of an inward change, an inward attitude that was totally God-centred. The sacrifices were there, but the attitudes weren't. A complete transformation and renewal of attitudes were required, as we can see from *5:4* and, in the New Testament, from *Romans 12:2*. Setting fire to a bullock doesn't mean that your relationship with God is as it should be. Getting your heart in tune with God, really repenting and wanting to give up those things which displease God – that's what puts you right with him, says Hosea. Matthew Henry, still one of the great commentators on the Bible despite his rather archaic language, puts it like this: “*There were good things entrusted to them to keep, the jewels of mercy and piety, and the knowledge of God, in the cabinet of sacrifice and burnt offering, but they betrayed their trust, kept the cabinet but pawned the jewels for the gratification of a base lust, and this is that for which God justly has a quarrel with them.*” (Nice, isn't it? I wish I could think of things like that!) The cabinet is valueless without the jewels: sacrifice and burnt offerings are meaningless without the right attitudes.

Jesus himself used this verse to challenge the Pharisees, the most outwardly pious and religious people of his day, in *Matthew 9:13* and *12:7*. He was always very strongly opposed to a preoccupation with superficial, outward things at the expense of those things which really matter, so it was the hypocrites who most often felt the lash of his tongue. Just look at what he has to say to them in *Matthew 23:23-28*.

But what do these words mean here? What is so special about “*mercy*” and “*acknowledgment of God*”? Well, “*mercy*” is another of those words in Hebrew which has a much wider range of meaning than our English equivalent. It can also be translated “*compassion*” or “*steadfast love*”. Using both those words really helps us to get to the heart of what Hosea is trying to say here. The steadfast love is to be shown towards God: it is faithfulness towards him and a renouncing of all other gods and idols. When we talk of God's mercy, as we often do, it signifies the way in which he is always totally faithful to us. But this love is not something that can be shown only in one direction – it is not something that should be directed only towards God. It needs to be shown in our attitudes and behaviour to those around us, and in this sense it is best translated “*compassion*”. We might put the two things together and call it “*justice*”.

As God's people, we can never be content with showing our love to God only in our worship. That Godward love needs to be demonstrated in neighbourward action. Look at what James has to say in his letter in the New Testament, in *James 1:26,27*. We cannot sit in our churches and little holy huddles and ignore what is going on around us in the world. Our calling is to bring the compassion of God into the lives of those who are less advantaged than we are, it is to offer people (as we saw in our studies in *Mark* a while back) glimpses of the Kingdom of God here and now. The gospel is not simply a matter of words – it is actions too: in fact, it is actions first and foremost. That's what Jesus was communicating when he read from the Scripture at Nazareth in *Luke 4:16-21*. The people of Hosea's day were doing all the business in church (or their equivalent), but once they got outside it was back to the greed, selfishness and worshipping of other gods that now characterised their lives.

“*Acknowledgment of God*” goes back to what we were saying last week when we looked at chapter 4 (*4:1*). It means “*knowledge of God*”, a real relationship with him, not just the odd nod in his direction. We are talking about an intimate acquaintance with him. We often think of an acknowledgment as being the bare minimum – “*She hardly even acknowledged me in the street*” – a brief wave of the hand, a short note to acknowledge a letter that we don't want to reply to in full. Where God's concerned it has to be much more than that: it has to mean total commitment, and attitude of mind and a way of life that are totally submitted to him. We can't go around with “*God*” written on our pencil case on Sunday and “*Money*” or “*Home*” or “*Job*” written on it the rest of the week.

Now, you may object that sacrifices and burnt offerings are not that relevant today, so there's not a lot of point going on about all of this in our situation. Well, it's something that we need to put into our own context, like the "fasting" of *Isaiah 58*. We need to see it for what it really represents – both *Isaiah* and *Hosea* are talking about meaningless ritual – "religious" things that the people were doing but which were totally divorced from the reality of their faith: things that the people did because they thought they would bring them favour with God, but which bore no relation to their lives beyond the Temple or holy place.

It obviously doesn't take too much thought, I hope, to see how that applies to us today. For many apparent Christians, the apparent form is all. They come along to church on Sunday to ease their conscience or out of a sense of duty or habit, to say "Amen" to the odd prayer of confession; they put their money in the offering (or, for them, the "collection") as a way of showing some sort of charity; they sing the hymns and songs with a certain amount of enthusiasm born of thanks for this week's crop of goodies; they even come back from Christian conventions all fired up for God; when things don't go quite right, they know to come and ask someone to pray for them. But underneath it all there's the same old selfishness and me-centred attitude that means they're indistinguishable from anyone else the rest of the week. Maybe there's a nodding acquaintance with God, especially if it suits their own agenda, but the relationship is still very one-sided.

I used to quote a lot from the Puritan writers, especially Richard Baxter. He wrote a book entitled *The Character Of The Sound And Confirmed Christian* and in it there is a description of what he calls "The Seeming Christian". Part of what he says here is very apt here: "Knowing that he is in the hands of God, to prosper and destroy him, he will humble himself to escape his judgements, and praise him with some gladness for the sunshine of prosperity; and he will seem to be thanking God when he is but rejoicing in the accommodation of his flesh." God doesn't want that kind of "cupboard love" – he wants loyalty, constant love, steadfast love, love that is shown in action by our compassion and our concern for justice. God wants us really to know him, not just to know about him. And he wants that commitment to involve our whole lives, to be real wherever we are, not just in church or the holy huddles that we mistakenly call fellowship. Going through the motions is not an opting for the followers of Jesus Christ. *Hosea's* message here is "Get involved or get out!"

And getting involved means showing something of that justice in our dealings with the people around us, demonstrating the righteousness of God in our daily contact with our neighbours, colleagues, friends, families – as well as getting involved in the work for justice that is going on in the wider world. It also means showing love in our relationships within the church, taking seriously Jesus' words that others will be able to identify his followers by their love for one another within the Christian community.

Why get involved in these ways? Why pledge our allegiance to God alone? Because God made us, he created us, he befriended us – only to see us rejecting him and ignoring him – putting some other god or idol's name on our pencil case. Yet he still loves us and he sent his Son Jesus to bear our sins, to take on himself the consequences of our own wrong choices and wrong actions – despite our rejection of him. Now he pleads with us – "I didn't go through the motions for you: it wasn't an empty or superficial gesture. Why can't you respond with real commitment? Why do you only talk to me one day a week? Why do you never read the book I've given you? Why don't my standards, my ideals, the values of my kingdom mean anything to you when you're with your colleagues, your neighbours, your friends? *I desire steadfast love, loyalty and compassion from you. I want you to know me fully rather than go through empty and meaningless rituals.*" How will you reply?

(Housegroup notes on next page)

**STUDIES IN HOSEA**  
**4. Mercy not sacrifice**  
***Hosea 6:1-10***

The people of Israel to whom Hosea is prophesying have been judged by God to be guilty of idolatry and ignoring God's law for them. As a result, the people are experiencing all kinds of problems, both within their own nation and from other foreign powers. When they really hit rock bottom they decide to turn back to God.

The first three verses of *Hosea 6* tell us what the people were thinking – they seem to have a very bland attitude to God and to what he will do for them. That attitude is exposed in God's reply to them in the following verses. He shows them up to be fickle and shallow in their response to him.

The key verse in this section is *6:6* – "*For I desire mercy not sacrifice and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*" God is saying to them that their outward show of worship – simply following a ritual tradition – is no good unless there is something behind it. He is looking for "*mercy*", which could be translated "compassion" or "steadfast love", and "*acknowledgment of God*", which really means "knowledge of God" or a real relationship with him (look back at *4:1*).

As God's people, we should beware just going through the motions, following the "rituals" of church attendance and doing the "right" things, if there is no real sense of justice behind it all, and if we are not really in tune with God. This theme is very much to the fore in the preaching of the other Old Testament prophets – look at *Isaiah 58*, *Amos 5:21-24* or *Micah 6:6-8*. Jesus was also very harsh on some of the people of his day who seemed to be more concerned with outward show than with their inward attitudes, as we see in *Matthew 23:23-28*. And look, too, at *James 1:26,27*.

**Questions for discussion**

1. People very often turn to God or make some attempt at prayer in a crisis. Why do you think this is?
2. The things that we read about in *Hosea 6:1-3* are all true, aren't they? So why was God so displeased with the people of Israel for thinking that way?
3. "*Mercy*" can also mean "justice" or "compassion". Give some examples of what you think this means in practice.
4. When Hosea talks about "*knowledge of God*", he means **knowing** God, rather than **knowing about** God. What's the difference?
5. In what ways can we find ourselves getting involved in meaningless ritual rather than really living out the truth of God's word? What can we do about it?
6. Is it wrong to see worship (or prayer or Bible study) as a habit? Why/why not?