

“HOSEA 5 – GOD’S LONGING”

Hosea 7:8-16; 11:1-4

When I was a kid, my grandparents used to live just across the street from us and if my mum ever went out for the day and wasn't able to cook for us (she might have been going to C&A Modes in Southampton to buy a new hat or visiting an old friend in a village outside the town), my dad would have his lunch at the canteen and my brother and I would go over the road to grandma's for our meal. There are two things that stick in my mind about my grandma's cooking – one is her amazing coffee and walnut cake, which should surely have won prizes of some sort: the other is her upside down sponge pudding. If the former was the Chelsea of the culinary art, the latter was her Torquay United. It was awful! Imagine, if you will, a small cardboard box, slightly charred on the outside, and filled with a kind a warm, acrid wallpaper paste. It was made slightly more palatable by the pineapple rings on the top (or bottom) and the custard that was poured over it in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise the taste. The thing just hadn't been cooked properly.

Hold that image in your mind for a moment – some of you are probably reliving a similar situation with your taste buds even now. Think of the sight you might see in the parks, or even on the streets, of Lichfield. Indeed, there is sometimes even evidence of it on the football, rugby and hockey pitches of this city. Men who are obviously knocking on a bit, their grey Bobby Charlton-style hair flopping sadly over one side of their head, trying to look athletic. I used to overtake one when I was walking the children to school in the morning. They jog around the streets and parks, their faces red and their chests heaving like something out of a museum of steam – men who think they're in the prime of life, but who are looked upon by others with derision, by healthcare professionals with desperate concern and by anyone from Waits with a resigned smile.

Finally, another scene in the park. When we lived in London, I used to go down to the park with one of my children (whom I will allow to remain anonymous, even though he isn't here this morning) to feed the ducks and squirrels. The squirrels ate the nuts and my little child ate the bread for the ducks, but he also tried to **give** it to the pigeons. He didn't throw it to them, but tried to deliver each crumb personally, running after the pigeons and thus scaring them half to death. And as they ran away – **ran**, mark you, not flew – they would scatter in all directions, bumping into each other and banging into the walls and railings. It is hard to conceive of anything more stupid and thoughtless (than the pigeons, that is!).

Now, those three little scenes – the half-baked cake, the old man who thinks he's still young and the stupid pigeon who doesn't know where he's running to – are all used by Hosea in this prophecy to describe Israel (or Ephraim, as Hosea often calls them). In *Hosea 7:8-12* he uses these three rather humorous little images to point to three things about the nation of Israel that run very much counter to what God wants for the them.

They are like a cake that hasn't been mixed or cooked properly because they have mixed themselves up with the wrong sorts of people and so they have lost their strength and distinctiveness. The ingredients that should have been there, the things that God required of them – such as justice, mercy, acknowledgement of God himself (as we've seen over the past two or three weeks) – were missing and had been replaced by spurious religious rituals and, more importantly, by the customs and practices of the pagan nations around them. They no longer stood out as God's people; they were just like all the rest, and (just like grandma's cake) they were not strong enough any more – in this case, to stand up to the intrigues around them.

It's easy for us to be like that. We can adopt so much of the world's ideas and behaviours and attitudes that we cease to be distinctively God's people. We are, to connect Hosea's image with today's language, all mixed up and our ideas are half-baked. Jesus, in the “Sermon on the Mount”, reminded his followers that they were to stay salty, and St Paul, in the words we mentioned last week, told the Roman Christians that they are not to be “*conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.*”

Israel was also like a man who thinks he is strong and athletic, but is deluding himself. That kind of man is living in the past. So too were Israel. They were relying on past glories or past experiences of God's goodness to them. Because of their heritage they were arrogant and thought that no-one could ever defeat them. They failed to realise that they had to keep up their love of and faithfulness to God as something ongoing – not as a once and for all down payment. So to the nations around – and, in a different sense, to God – they looked as ridiculous as an old man trying to play football.

Are you sometimes guilty of that? Is the church sometimes like that? Living on the glory of the past, thinking that the occasion of your conversion or baptism or confirmation is the end of the matter – you're "saved" and so there's no need to do anything else? The Church was once the dominant institution in our land, in our city, so we assume that it still is and we don't therefore have to do anything to try and communicate with people the Good News of Jesus Christ? It's rubbish! We must beware giving that impression to those who as yet are outside the church, and beware of trying to hoodwink God in the same way.

Finally, Hosea accuses Israel of diplomatic duplicity. They rush from one alliance to another – at one moment they're trying to get help from Egypt, the next from Assyria. They are deceived by the talk of the worldly powers and just take what anyone has to offer them without thinking and, what's more important in their context, without any recourse to their God. They're just like a stupid pigeon flitting from one thing to another without any sense of purpose.

How often are we taken in by the seemingly plausible trends and ideas from the world around us. It's as true of our church life as of our own individual lives: the latest fad that comes along is baptised by some clever Christian and easily takes the place of the real mission that God has for us. I used to have a cartoon of a man standing in front of a huge aircraft hangar filled with boxes and crates. To one side of him, his wife is telling another woman, "George was so sure that Christian hub caps would be the next big seller!" A daft example, maybe, but the point is well made. Do you look like a stupid bird flitting from one idea to the next? Or are your feet set solidly on the unchanging words of God and the uncompromising truth of the gospel?

Having pointed out the utter stupidity of Israel's position, Hosea goes on to make three telling contrasts between what God wants for the people and what their actual response is. God doesn't want this state of affairs to continue; Israel are his chosen people, so he wants the best for them – it is deeply distressing for him to see them behaving in this way. You probably feel the same yourself if your child, whom you have tried so hard to train up in some way, goes and does something really stupid that not only embarrasses you but also makes him or her out to be a fool. When I was teaching I ran one of the school football teams – we had the most successful team in the area and a fool-proof game plan. Regularly we would score into double figures. But it relied on keeping to what we'd agreed to do as a team and when someone tried to do their own thing, the plans from training broke down and we lost.

In *6:13b* we read God's words about his people: "*I long to redeem them but they speak lies against me.*" God can see the terrible mess that the people are in and he can see the even greater crises that they are hurtling towards. His only real desire is to help them, to love them, to restore them to their former relationship with him. But they not only reject his advances, they actually tell lies against him. There were false prophets who were giving all the wrong ideas about God: there were those who blamed God for the mess they were in: they had no idea what was going on so they turned against their God.

God still longs to redeem men and women. It is not his will that anyone should perish, so the New Testament tells us. All he asks is that we return to him, accept his offer of forgiveness which is made available through the death of Jesus Christ and renew a right relationship with him. But what happens? Satan, the Great Deceiver, muscles in on the act with a whole lot of lies about God – "God can't be a God of love like he says he is: look at all the disasters in the world. You can't trust God to supply your needs

– he might say he wants the best for you, but you’ve still got all these problems, haven’t you? God says he’ll forgive you, but that sin you’ve committed is just a bit too bad for him.”

And not only do we accept these lies, we continue to spread them! “If you haven’t got all you want, it’s because your faith isn’t strong enough.” Nothing to do with what God’s will is for your life. “We’ll forgive most things, but I’m afraid that sexual sin is a bit beyond what we consider acceptable for the church to forgive, so we’d rather you didn’t bother God with it.” God longs to redeem his people, so let’s not get drawn into the habit of lying about him.

Secondly, God wants to hear from the people, he longs for them to pray to him. But what do they do? They rush off after other gods, other ways of getting things done. *7:14* contains a couple of expressions that need a little bit of explanation. “*They wail upon their beds*” refers not to the possibility of their going home and crying themselves to sleep, but to the fact that at the ritual observances of the pagan gods, they would often indulge in sexual activity around the altar and that they would also recline on couches for a ritual meal. “*Wailing upon their beds*” means that they were following the practices of the worshippers of other gods.

So too does the other little phrase, which is translated in the NIV (from which we read just now) as “*They gather together for grain and new wine*” We said right at the beginning of this series that this is a very difficult book to translate and you may see from the little note at the bottom of the page and from other versions of the Bible that you might have that it’s actually more likely to mean “*They slash themselves.*” This was another pagan practice that is still carried on by some (mainly eastern) religious groups today. They whip themselves and slash themselves with swords in an attempt to make their gods listen to them, just as we read the prophets of Baal did in *1 Kings 18:25-28*. I vividly remember when I was young seeing some pictures of Arab men doing it in my dad’s *National Geographic Magazine*. When it was time for harvest, the people would lay into themselves in the hope that the goddess of grain or the god of wine would give them a good harvest. God wanted to do that for them anyway, but they just turned away from him.

Again, today, we often turn to all kinds of other “gods” to help us out in our own lives. When there is a particular problem with our finance, our health, our job, our family, our church, very often prayer is a long way down the list of things to do. I used to subscribe to a couple of American journals about ministry, and the articles are very good – but the adverts were something else. If your church isn’t getting the finance that it should, you need to call in a special firm of “stewardship consultants” who help you (for a fat fee) improve your offering yield. If you’re experiencing difficulty getting to grips with your Bible study, what you need is not prayer and discipline, but a new set of computer software that will make the whole job easier. And the same things happen over this side of the Atlantic, only in different ways. God simply wants us to turn to him in prayer, not to go chasing off after the false gods of materialism and opportunism around whose altars the world dances.

Thirdly, in *7:15* we read that God “*trained and strengthened them, but they plot evil against him.*” I’d like to link that with the other part of the reading that we had earlier from *11:1-4*. I find these verses to be amazingly moving poetry. They express the extraordinary love of a father for his child, a love that is not only ignored, but actively rejected. Seeing your child take his or her first steps is a wonderful experience – I remember Erik’s first steps one Wednesday morning (while Sally was out at work). But the joy of that experience is tempered soon after by the knowledge that now he can walk away, that there will be occasions when you want to show him love but he will run off rather than allow you to pick him up and cuddle him (not that I want to do that quite so much these days!).

Here we have a picture of God calling out to his child and that child running further and further away, blind to the love that God wants to show. The more he calls them, the more determined they seem to be to give their allegiance to other gods and idols. I’ve mentioned *Ezekiel 16* before in this series – if you haven’t yet read it, have a look at it with these verses in your mind as well. You’ll probably find the language shocking, but you cannot fail to be moved by the power of God’s love expressed in those words.

God still longs for us to return to him. If it wasn't for him, we would have nothing, absolutely nothing. He reaches out to us and to those around us in our world with arms of love, with the unconditional and unqualified love of the perfect parent. And yet, many people just don't realise the extent of the love that is on offer. The more he calls, the farther they go from him. They just do not realise that it was God who healed them, who sent Jesus to die so that they could know real life and enjoy it in all its fullness both here on earth and for eternity with God.

Just think for a moment of the emotions that you experience when you call out to the person that you most love to come to you, and they ignore you and keep walking away. That is how God feels, but infinitely more so when we reject his will for us, when we spurn his love. This morning, as we take in our hands the symbols of God's ultimate expression of love for us, this bread and this wine, let's run back towards God, back to his open and loving arms, and bask in the warmth of his love for us. Don't go looking for cheap thrills and easy answers from the gods the world worships. Don't lie about who God is or what he can do. Don't reject all that he has done for you in Jesus. God is longing to hear from you!

Housegroup notes on next page.

STUDIES IN HOSEA
5. God's Longing
Hosea 7:8-16; 11:1-4

Hosea uses three memorable images in chapter 7 in order to describe Israel from God's point of view:-

Firstly, **the half-baked cake** (7:8). The ingredients have been wrongly mixed and the flavour has been lost, just as Israel has mixed with the surrounding pagan tribes and lost its distinctiveness.

Secondly, **the old man** (7:9) who thinks he is still strong and athletic, but is deluded, relying, like Israel, on the memory of past glories to keep itself going in the present – and to fool itself into thinking that everything is OK spiritually.

Thirdly, **the silly pigeon** (7:11) who flits from place to place with no idea of where he is going – a picture of Israel's diplomatic duplicity and frantic attempts to form alliances with other nations.

These images can also be applied to God's people today. We can easily lose our distinctiveness as we compromise with the ideas of the world around us and as we allow other value systems to influence our belief and behaviour. We are often tempted to live on past glories and successes in our spiritual lives (have another look at *Revelation 2:1-7; 3:14-22*). And we can easily find ourselves wandering off aimlessly in search of other experiences and philosophies.

God can see the situation and longs to help his people, to restore them to himself (7:13b), but they continue to worship other gods (7:14 – a reference to pagan practices). Even though God has "*trained and strengthened them*" (7:15), they still turn against him.

In 11:4, we read of God's amazing love towards his people – the love of the perfect father for his children. (Compare it with *Ezekiel 16*.) God still longs for us to turn to him and he reaches out his arms to receive us.

Questions for discussion

1. What harmful effects can "*mixing with the nations*" have on us as God's people today? Give some examples.
2. Why do people like to rely on past experiences so much? Is it wrong? Why/why not?
3. How do we "*speak lies against God*" (7:13) today? What can we do about it?
4. Does anything particularly strike you about the image of God as Father in 11:1-4 (or *Ezekiel 16*)? Do you find it helpful or not?
5. How could we express the message of Hosea for today? Is it still relevant?