

“HOSEA 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 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. 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 direction in which our own contemporary culture is moving.

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. 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 it was 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. 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*. 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.

So, “*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 sin was not enough – *is* not enough – that sin needs to be dealt with in an attitude of true repentance. And Christmas is the time when we celebrate the coming into our world of Jesus Christ who guarantees our forgiveness when we do repent. 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. We can read through these verses without a great deal of comment.

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 – it 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 go “home”, back to my parents’ house, to the place where I was brought up, one thing I can be sure of is that there will be plenty of everything. There is so much to eat, so many expressions of love, such warmth and abundance. That’s what Hosea is talking about here.

And God wants to show us these blessings – as individuals, as families, as Christians, as a church. It’s so easy to see the extravagance of Christmas and turn away from it, thinking it’s all about commercialism and materialism, but Christmas is all about the extravagance, 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.

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 this Christmas time. “*Come home, come home to the LORD your God.*” What God showed us at Christmas – 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)

STUDIES IN HOSEA

8. 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?