

Bible study - HOSEA: 6 vv 1 – 6; 11 vv 1 –4; and 14 v 4
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It's said of some sermons that they start not with a text, but with a theme that is dear to the preacher's heart; the preacher then hunts for the texts that fit with what he wants to say anyway. In a Bible Study it matters even more to be 'under scripture', and not just developing a chosen theme, with a few texts added. Even so, I've made the choice of Hosea for this Bible Study since it connects so well with this conference's theme of Enduring Relationships.

My own background is that of a parish priest, whose first academic background was philosophy, and not Biblical studies. Naturally I have officiated at many, many weddings. I know that some have endured while others have not. Early on I took a lavish wedding and I had duly talked to the couple about commitment. However, the marriage lasted just over a year. Then the ex-wife was back as a witness for her sister's wedding, so one member of the congregation remarked 'I hope you will make a better job of it this time'. Whether it's a civil Registrar or a priest, they connect figures for marital breakdown with the people who have made promises in their presence.

Anyway, it's time to put Hosea into context and to draw attention to some of the main themes in the book of prophecies that bears his name. He was a prophet in the 8th century BC, living in the Northern Kingdom. When his words denounce or long for a change of heart it is mainly Ephraim he addresses. By this time Assyrian inroads mean that the Northern Kingdom has lost some of its territory. But the area of Ephraim remains, the area corresponding to the original homeland of the tribe of Ephraim. Judah in the South is also mentioned and condemned with equal vigour. That's because the prophet's passionate conviction is that God's people have turned their backs on their covenant with God, and that covenant was originally with both North and South.

All the prophets from this period are reckoning with the threat posed to God's people by the great empires that surround them. The forthright words often look forward, underlining that destruction and even exile are near and cannot be long delayed. There is also the constant reminder that God's people have not been faithful but have repeatedly turned away. A key attribute of God is his faithfulness, his constancy, his enduring love which will not give up or let go. And this is what Hosea underlines and makes specific as he draws a parallel between God's dealings with his people and his own personal story. For Hosea has married Gomer, a wife who is faithless and adulterous; and yet he does not abandon her.

It goes further than that. Hosea says, in the first chapter, that in risking this marriage he is acting on God's instructions:

'The Lord said to Hosea – Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord'. (Hos. 1 v 2). Then the children of the relationship are given strange names, which imply that, like Judah and Ephraim, they have their mother's waywardness in them. By Chapter 2 Gomer is already pursuing other men, ignoring all her husband's gifts and kindnesses; and at once the parallel is drawn with those who neglect the true God for idols and immorality. There's the threat of vengeance and punishment, but there are also words that point to the possibility of forgiveness:

'I will now persuade her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.'
(Hos. 2 v 14).

This is the kind of contrast that runs through the book, whether the verses are about the tangled relationship of Hosea and Gomer, or are speaking more generally of the situation of Ephraim and Judah. At the beginning of this study I've listed two key passages and one key verse. They are 6 vv 1 –6; 11 vv 1 –4; and 14 v 4. Having spoken of the book in general I will focus on those verses and in relation to two particular themes. First the stress on commitment and on all that goes with the notion of a covenant-relationship. Then what you might call the metronome of forgiveness. At one extreme the pointer moves to anger and rejection, at the other to forgiveness and acceptance.

First God as the God whose love is faithful and who calls us to reflect that love in our own relationships. If you think about it it's a bit strange. The God of the covenant calls people to be faithful; and yet the kind of parallel, so emphasised in Hosea, between divine and human faithfulness is not always echoed in the narrative of the Old Testament and its characters. It's not just that there are those who go after false Gods. The patriarchs, the kings of Israel and Judah, and other key players have very involved and inconstant personal lives. It is quite a while before God's faithfulness, and the way that is reflected in the ten commandments, marks the actual pattern of Jewish life more clearly.

Nowadays it is often observed, sometimes with regret, sometimes with weary acceptance, that the kind of commitment which derives from the Bible's central tradition and values is far away from contemporary practice and assumptions. The excitement and emotion of passion comes and goes; the kind of love that endures and deepens can so easily be threatened and put at risk. Hosea puts it this way, thinking of God's people, rather than of his errant wife:

'What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?

What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud,

Like the dew that goes away early.' (Hos. 6 v 4).

That love is often inconstant and that commitment can easily be put at risk; that's part of the human story and a major part of our classic dramas. But then Hosea also shares with us his trust in the promise that the very faithfulness of God can find some echo in our lives.

If you say that, you must at once take to heart what can be the undercurrent in any marriage or in any close relationship. There is acceptance and commitment. But there can also be anger when it emerges that this commitment has been betrayed in some way. Hosea puts it like this in v 4 of chapter 14 – (it is God who speaks) – 'I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them'.

How is anger between people to be dealt with? It needs to be expressed, not buried: all that is hurtful and painful needs to be brought into the open and confronted; and yet, while the anger is expressed and acknowledged, it is not allowed to have the final word or to impair the relationship fatally. How does that come about: all I can say is that, by God's grace, that can and does happen. We can all reflect on times when we have been angry, or when others close to us have had good reason to be angry with us. We can also put that in the wider context that Hosea gives us – the context of the mystery of God, calling us, not giving up on us and so letting go of his anger.

Lastly those verses from Chapter 11. Here the picture is in terms of family life, the image is of the parent who can never forget the early years, the time when the child was so close and so dependent. 'It was I – (God is speaking) – who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms, But they did not know that I healed them.' (11 v. 3)

So it is, Hosea says, between God and his people, and as people remember before God who they are really are, at every stage of their lives. Within any family there can be those who choose to go their own way, and who show no sign of acknowledging their roots and their bonds. And yet, Hosea teaches, the God who was involved in a parent's care for a child is the God who is ever with us, as children, as parents, as grandparents.

Verse 4 reads like this: 'I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and I fed them.'

We all have our special photographs. One that is special to me shows me holding the fourth child who joined our family; in the photo he's an infant and it was taken before he was finally adopted. Through that son we now have our first grandchild. I think of that when I read that verse from Hosea: 'I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.'