

HOSEA

Our Old Testament reading this morning is from the book of Hosea.

Though there are 14 chapters in Hosea, our lectionary only gives us two snippets - chapter 1 and chapter 11. However, those two chapters are enough to give us an overview of the prophet's message.

Hosea's ministry took place during a period of **apostasy for Israel**. They'd gone off the rails - which was the story of Israel's life, really. The Israelites over time had allowed their worship to become **contaminated by the Canaanites**. The people had compromised. They had started to revere the gods of Canaan, believing that it was helpful for their well being. Their responses to God had become **half hearted, their worship insincere**. They were unfaithful to him.

Every time I read the book of Hosea, I sense **God's pain**. The pain of seeing a people he loved and cherished - continually betraying him, giving their allegiance to bits of wood.

Over and over, through his prophets, **God called his people to repentance**. Over and over, they **ignored him**, until God had no choice but to bring his people to their knees through **judgement**. God went to great lengths through Hosea to try and woo his people back. God called Hosea to become a living parable – a living illustration. (It was a tough call being a prophet!) He ordered Hosea to marry an adulterous wife called Gomer. Each of their three children was given a symbolic name which represented a part of Hosea's ominous message. It was "turn or burn" . In other words, come back to God in repentance, or reap the consequences.

Hosea's relationship to Gomer was **symbolic of God's relationship with Israel**. As the story unfolds through the following chapters, we learn that the children were told to kick their unfaithful mother out of the house. But it wasn't to get rid of her – it was to reform her. Hosea was told to keep loving her, and then to take her back, keeping her in isolation for a while. These events speak to us graphically of the Lord's relationship with Israel.

The Israelites were unfaithful like Gomer, following after the gods of the Caananites. Israel had to go through a period of exile – as did Gomer. But the Lord never stopped loving Israel, and longed to take them back, just as Hosea took back Gomer.

Sadly, Israel continued to ignore God, and God grieved. Judgment became inevitable. God ultimately stepped back from them. The Israelites were conquered and taken into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians. **But you can almost hear God's heart breaking** as you read through Hosea's oracles. If only his people would repent and turn back to Him - he could bless them.

A key verse in the book of Hosea is found in chapter 10, verse 12, which says.

"Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for its time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you."

In this verse, God pleads with his people to do **three things**:

1. "Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love." Sowing and reaping go together - as any of you who have ever had a veggie garden will know. God's love for Israel was **unfailing**, but the fruit of that love - His covenant blessing - **was conditional**. It was conditional upon what His people sowed. **"Sow for yourselves righteousness"** says the Lord "Do what is right - come back to me. Be faithful. Observe my laws" - the **consequence** of which would be **wonderful, overflowing, abundant blessing** for the people He loved.

It is **God's nature to bless**. He longed to shower the blessings of the covenant on his people. He didn't want to punish them. **He wanted to commune with them**. He wanted to bless them with a gloriously rich land of their own, flowing with milk and honey, descendants without number, where he would be their God, and they would be his people. But unless they turned to Him once more - how could he bless them?

2. Secondly God pleads with His people to "break up their unplowed ground". God didn't want to see Israel continue to be unproductive, like a field that had gone hard and crusty, lying fallow in the hot sun. The longer His people ran after false gods, the **harder their hearts** became. The more insensitive they became to his voice. The more their love grew cold. **It was a downward spiral**. Instead, **God longed for them to repent** and turn to him once more. He wanted them to make **a radical new beginning** and become productive and fruitful once more. In fact, if they would only turn back to them, God would give them **NEW hearts** - hearts of flesh to replace their hearts of stone, as Isaiah records - but his people had to make the first move.

3. "It's time to seek Me, says the Lord, until I come and shower righteousness on you"
The 'righteousness' spoken of here has a slightly different meaning to the righteousness the people are told to 'sow' for themselves. Here it means all the blessings of the covenant that God made with his people. - Things like protection, land, descendants, blessing. And they are showered upon the people as they seek the Lord.

There are many promises throughout Scripture about seeking the Lord. We are told that **if we seek him with all our heart**, we will certainly find Him. Through Hosea, God was pleading with the Israelites to change their ways - to **repent** and turn back to him - and **to seek him with all their heart** - again, with the promise of such blessing if only they would.

God hasn't changed. Though we live in a different testament - a different dispensation, the **foundations of our relationship with God are dependent upon the same things** - the same principles - that the Israelite's relationship with God depended on. He asks of us the same three things.

1. **Sow for ourselves righteousness**. - To do what is right in God's sight. This doesn't just mean refraining from murdering or adultery or ripping off the local bank....This is referring primarily to our allegiance to God, particularly in relation to the first commandment. **"You shall have no other gods but me"**. That is righteous living. It puts everything else in perspective. Other gods are anything which become more important to us than God, and our relationship with him.

We need to often reassess this - to slow down long enough to reflect on whether we have allowed ourselves to **compromise** or water down our singleness of heart towards God. Are we **faithful to**

his commandments? Is he **absolutely first** in our lives, is he more important to us than anything else? God won't settle for anything less.

And as we sow for ourselves righteousness, we too will 'reap the fruit of unfailing love.

God continues to be a God whose nature it is to bless. Now, while I don't think we can manipulate God into giving us **what we want** by ticking certain boxes, I do believe that if we are walking closely with God, he can work in our lives without hindrance, and we will experience his blessing.

I remember a particularly dry period I was going through some years ago. As I was in prayer one day, telling God how spiritually parched I was feeling, he gave me a picture of a gushing waterfall, surrounded by lush greenery. His message came through loud and clear - if I wanted the benefit of the water to quench my thirst, it wasn't going to happen from a distance. I needed to go and stand under the waterfall. If we want to experience God's blessing, we need to be in the place where it is available.

2. God also calls us to break up our unplowed ground! I wonder if we are aware of any 'fallow ground' in our own walk with God? This might relate to things such as our prayer lives; maybe our Bible reading habits; our relationships with God's people; our use of the gifts he has given us; our very relationship with God himself. Sometimes though, we don't always notice the unplowed ground in our spiritual lives. That's because the further we drift from God, the less it bothers us - until our relationship with Him shrivels and dies.

So we need to ask the help of the Holy Spirit to reveal this to us. We need to intentionally reflect on the spiritual aspect of our being, asking God to reveal to us any unproductive, unplowed ground, and we need to make that radical new beginning which will make us productive and fruitful once more.

3. It is time to seek the Lord, says the last part of this verse, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

To seek the Lord is something that takes initiative on our part. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells us that if we ask, it will be given to us; if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened to us. Each of those things requires an act of our will, and prayerful determination to make it happen.

Perhaps we know we need something more in our walk with God - but we don't know where to start. The best place to start - always - is prayer. To ASK is what Jesus tells us to do. Ask God to give us passion for him if we feel it is lacking. God will certainly answer that prayer. Then as that passion grows, it will motivate us to want to go deeper in God. Once we get a taste of God - it is never enough. We always want more. That's how he's wired us. "I have come that they may have Life", said Jesus - 'and have it to the full!'

We need to seek the Lord - until he comes and showers righteousness on us. Remember, the "righteousness" spoken of in this verse means the covenant blessings that the Israelites were promised. They would be "showered" upon them as they walked in obedience to God - a very graphic description of abundance. Our covenant blessings are found in Christ. As we submit our

lives to him, we have His Spirit within us, we have the promise of eternal life, and we have the privilege of belonging to His people.

The book of Hosea reveals to us the heart of God; his longing for his people to turn back to him; his willingness to forgive, and his desire to bless. Please take time to read the whole book through during the week if you can - it's only a few pages - and allow God to speak to you through Hosea's oracles.

As we ask, seek and knock, may we know the refreshment, renewal and blessing God longs to shower upon us.

Let's pray