

Hosea 1:1-2:1
Hosea: the human parable
Notes from a sermon given at Christ Church Liverpool
6th January 2008

Introduction

Part 1: Why study Hosea?

If you have been here, or at another church, over Christmas you will, no doubt, have been singing songs and hearing talks about the incarnation.

The astonishing miracle that God in Christ should take human form and be born as a little Jewish baby in the yard at the back of a Palestinian pub.

You may even have heard or thought about those most famous of Bible words from John's account of Jesus' life:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son."

It's striking to think about an amazing love that can encompass people from all of the hundreds of nations and thousands of tribes in the world.

But if you study John's gospel, as we have over the last term and will again after Easter, you will see that the love that brought Christ to be born, minister, suffer, die and rise again for the people of the world is a unique love not because the world is so big – but because the world is so bad. It's impossible to have a truly Christian understanding of the love of God and the wonder of the incarnation without having explored the depths of human wickedness to see exactly what it is that God is doing in loving people like me and you.

Hosea 1, with its talk of adultery, vileness, rejection and illegitimacy, isn't perhaps the kind of passage you might expect a church to take as a text for the new year. But I hope that, as we study this book over the next 3 months, we will come to understand both ourselves and our God in a new and more profound way.

As a church we believe that God delights to reveal himself to us through the pages of the Bible as we read it, study it and think about its teaching. So please do be praying with me, this week, that God will open our eyes over the next weeks to really grasp Hosea's message in our hearts as well as in our minds.

Part 2: What is going on in Hosea?

As you'll have noticed in our reading we know a little bit about Hosea's wife and children and they play quite a significant symbolic role in his book.

But we know almost nothing about Hosea himself. He was the son of Beeri – but we have no idea who Beeri was. We don't know which of the tribes of Israel he was from, where he lived or whether he was rich or poor. He was probably pretty young. Most men in Israel at that time got married before they were 16 so it's likely that Hosea was only a teenager when he got married and began his prophesying. That's all guesswork really. But we know for a fact when he lived – because v1 tells us.

In about 925BC the nation of Israel suffered from a civil war. It got split into the kingdom of Israel (confusing!) in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the South.

The line of kings in the south continued to be descended from David and Solomon and they were the legitimate kings that God had said should rule the nation. They included Uzziah, Jotham, Azah and Hezekiah mentioned here in v1.

In the North, which is the bit of the country Hosea preached to, there was a succession of bloody *coup d'états* and assassinations. After the long reign of Jeroboam II, mentioned here in 1:1 there were another 5 kings over a period of less than 30 years, none of whom are mentioned by Hosea – perhaps because as a faithful follower of God he considers only the kings of Judah to be legitimate, or perhaps because most of them lasted such a short time they weren't worth mentioning!

When Hosea started his ministry, about 760BC Israel was quite prosperous. In fact it was wealthier than it had been for about 200 years. There were no big superpower nations trying to invade or tax them. The economy was in good shape and there was lots of trade.

Following the Lord was still the official state religion of Israel and there were shrines to him at the towns of Bethel and Dan. But those shrines contained golden calf statues in direct contravention of the way that God had said he should be worshipped and the people of Israel had been heavily influenced by the religion and ethics of the surrounding nations. Many, it seems, were into worshipping the Baals, the ancient fertility Gods of the other nations, with accompanying rituals of sacred prostitution and even child sacrifice.

The country was wealthy, relatively secure and officially, if you like, "Christian" but the things people believed and the way they lived really bore

no resemblance at all to what God had said being one of his people should look like.

That's the situation into which Hosea steps with his searing, cutting condemnation of the people, straight from the mouth of God himself. The people's complacent self-satisfaction, Hosea says, is a result not of the genuine security that comes from being one of God's people but from presumptuous sin.

And Hosea condemns their wickedness, not just with his words, but with a life that becomes a kind of dramatic re-enactment of the relationship between the Lord and his people with Hosea playing the part of God and his wife and children cast in the role of Israel.

As the weeks unfold we'll see more about the details of what it was the people were doing that displeased God so much. But in this first chapter of Hosea we will learn:

- What sin is like.
- What happens when you sin.
- What God does about sin.

I Sin is vile adultery (1:2)

Hosea begins his ministry by getting married. The NIV softens what God actually says here to make it more acceptable to us. What God actually says is "take to yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom."

We know almost as little about Gomer, Hosea's wife, as we do about him. Diblaim could be either the town she comes from or her Father's name. We don't know if she was a prostitute before she married Hosea. We don't know whether she was unfaithful only after she was married to him. We don't know whether the 2nd and 3rd children mentioned here are Hosea's or not. And we don't know what happened that meant Hosea had to buy her back out of slavery in chapter 3. And we have no idea what kind of people his children turned out to be.

What we can be absolutely certain of is that God wanted to use Hosea's family relationships as a powerful illustration of what it was like for him to be in a relationship with the people of Israel.

And what it's like, God says, is being a cuckolded husband to a wife who behaves like a prostitute: "*the land [all the people of Israel who claim to belong to God] is guilty of the vilest whoredom by forsaking the Lord.*"

Sin is like being a prostitute. Before we go any further I want to make it clear that this is not an

attack on the wickedness of prostitution or a have a go at the people who hang round just outside here on the grass in the evening waiting for men to come and pay them for sex.

That is a very wicked thing to do – both on the part of the man and the women – but we all know, I hope, that the vast majority of women in our city who are prostitutes do that because they are in a position where they feel they have no choice. Most of these women are more sinned against than sinning and there are many brilliant organisations, Christian and secular, that exist to help people escape that lifestyle.

But Israel, God's people, when they sin is not like the street prostitute who may well be an illegal immigrant, with a drug habit, an exploitative pimp and all sorts of physical and mental health issues. No. The people of God are rich beyond imagining. They are married to the most caring, loyal, faithful and wealthy husband in the world. They are not sleeping around because they need the money but because they have decided they are bored with perfect love and want a sordid night in a cheap and grimy hotel.

All of the world's rejection of God and his standards is whoredom – because God in his goodness created everyone. And sin by God's people – the Old Testament Jews and New Testament Christians – is especially like prostitution because God has rescued us and made a covenant, a lifelong binding agreement with us.

In reality, of course, rejecting God is worse than adultery or prostitution. Human marriage is only an illustration of the relationship between God and his people.

For God to make an agreement, a covenant with us is infinitely more gracious than two sinful people making a covenant with each other. God has never wronged us at all. Even slightly, ever. So to break faith with him is massively more wicked even than to break faith with your wife or husband which, between people, is just about the worst sin you can commit.

Sin is vile adultery. But is every sin included? The smallest white lie? The least bit of coveting? Well let's look at what the passage says: "*the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord.*" It is departing from the Lord that he considers to be terrible prostitution. And whenever any of us does, says, thinks or desires anything that God says not to do, say, think or desire we are departing from him.

We are revealing the inclination of our hearts to worship ourselves and our own view about what we should do, say think and desire rather than worshipping God.

Later on in the letter, and especially next week, we'll see more about what forms the sin of Israel actually took and think a bit more about how we can be the same.

But for now we need to be clear that when God likens sin to adultery he isn't exaggerating. God's word over hundreds of years had left the people in no doubt that unfaithfulness to your marriage vows was always a terribly wicked thing. And here he makes clear that departing from him is more awful, more wicked, more terrible than the worse and most heinous adultery you can imagine.

We live in a world where all sorts of sins against other people – from unfaithfulness to a marriage partner to harsh gossip in the office – are constantly played down as mere trivia and where sinning against God by not believing his message is not considered bad at all but praised as free-thinking.

Each of us lives in a culture that is taking the rough edges off sin, putting make up on its ugliness and cleaning up its filth.

So we are always in danger of underestimating just how awful it is to not do what God says. We need to be reminded that to reject God, in any way, is to rebel against the one who made us and who loves us.

It is to betray a husband who has done us no wrong. Indeed a husband who has always been a perfect friend and lover. Sin is vile adultery.

2 Sin has terrible consequences (1:3-9)

Of course the great hope of most of the world's adulterers is that they won't get caught. That nobody will find out about their affair or, if they do, that their wife or husband will stand by them. There might be some difficult moments but it won't fundamentally ruin their life and prospects.

That, it seems, is how the people of Israel felt about their relationship with God.

They still had shrines to Yahweh. Perhaps he wouldn't notice the quiet worship of the fertility gods that was going on elsewhere?

Or, if he did, perhaps he, like a committed husband who cannot bear the thought of losing his beloved,

would just turn a blind eye or scold and then welcome back?

The arrogance of that assumption, which we show we share every time we disobey anything God has said, was based on the belief that they were the special ones in this relationship.

We are great people – and God is lucky to have us. But they should have known otherwise. When he made the marriage proposal, when God set out his covenant, his agreement with the people he told them that they were not special. Indeed they were the least of all people, he said.

Jesus does the same when he tells those who would follow him that they "are evil". He is the "special one" – not us. And we are sadly deluded if we think that God will either miss or overlook our sin.

Hosea, in the names of his three children, sets before the people of Israel the terrible consequences of covenant breaking.

In these names we see that when people sin God...

- a) Removes his power
- b) Takes away his love
- c) Cancels his covenant

a) Jezreel – God removes his power

150 years before Hosea's preaching the family of Jehu had, at God's command, seized power in Israel. They did so by killing the previous king and his family at the town of Jezreel.

The terrible bloodshed they brought about was God's judgment on the former king and his family for their awful wickedness.

But Jehu took great and bloodthirsty delight in the slaughter and he and his sons also presided over many awful events.

So Hosea predicts the end of the dynasty – and, just as he said, Jeroboam son of Jehoash was the last of the Jehuite kings ever to reign in Israel.

This was terrible not just for the family but for the people as the nation of Israel was plunged into years of infighting, and conflict.

A leader for the people was one of the great blessings that God gave in his agreement with them. But now their wickedness results in a failure of leadership and the terrible consequences that all have to endure.

b) Lo-Ruhamah

Hosea's second child, a daughter this time, has an even less ambiguous name – no mercy or not loved. What an awful name for a child to bear.

But the carrying of that name is just a tiny shadow of the reality it conveys about the people of Israel. Their God, the Lord, defined himself as the gracious and compassionate God. The gods of the nations around demanded that the people cut themselves and offer their children. They made no promises but acted however they liked on a whim.

But the god of Israel loved his people. It was almost the defining mark of their relationship. But now he calls them not loved.

c) Lo-Ammi

Years pass. Children in this era were often not weaned until the age of two or three. But have the people of Israel taken note of Hosea's warnings and repented? Have they listened to God's dire threats and sought his forgiveness? Not at all.

So God asks Hosea to explode the biggest bomb possible under their noses to wake them from their comfortable religious complacency. "Lo-Ammi" his third child is called – not my people.

The absolutely central, defining, most important thing about the people of Israel was that they were the people of God.

From the call of Abraham, centuries earlier the constant reassurance of God through good time and bad was the same: "I will be your God and you will be my people."

It was what he said to Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. It was at the heart of his covenant with Moses and the Israelites when they escaped from slavery in Egypt.

God phrases things here in such a way as to have maximum, between the eyes, emotional impact on the people Hosea is speaking to. When God first revealed himself to Moses through the burning bush, a vision that marked the start of a new and wonderful phase in their relationship, God revealed his name as "I am". Here he uses the same word again: *I am not your I am*.

It is hard to imagine a more fundamental and damning rejection than that one. Apart, perhaps, from this one: "*I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers.*"

The first words are God's rejection through Hosea on those who call themselves God's people but who do not listen to his word or walk in his ways.

The second words are what Jesus promises he will say on the last day to many who call themselves Christian, who call Jesus Lord, but who reveal that Jesus is not their Lord by not doing God's will.

Sin has terrible consequences.

It brings war and famine.

It kills children.

It ravages the environment.

It undermines good government and leadership.

It spirals ever downward into self-centred, self-serving lust and acquisitiveness.

But worst of all it leads to the damnation of God: *I am not your God. I never knew you.*

But what hope can there be?

Those brought up in homes where God was feared know we have broken his covenant.

And many of us have a life history of totally ignoring even the very existence of God, let alone his moral demands.

Well at the point of lowest ebb. As God seems to cancel his covenant with the people – I am not your God and you are not my people – Hosea introduces a note of hope.

3 God's leader will astonishingly undo sin's effects (1:10-2:1)

Suddenly, and without explanation all the promises of God to his people are reintroduced.

The promise to Abraham that his children, those who follow the Lord, would be beyond counting will certainly come true God says.

God's judgment will not just be reversed. Instead those who were not God's people will be his very children – sons of the living God. How can this be?

Well we're not told directly. But there is a hint. The terrible judgment of God and the effects of sin will be undone by one leader. You might have expected that to say one "king". But I think Hosea deliberately avoids the word because the recent history of the kings of Israel had been such a sad and sorry one.

And the king will bring them up out of the land – he will, more literally, resurrect them. And the king will bring about the vast expansion of the people of God among all the nations so that God's people are overwhelmingly numerous.

As Paul puts it in the book of Romans as he looks at the achievements of Jesus Christ: *“even for us whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? He says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one.”*

How can Jesus do this? How does he achieve such an amazing rescue for people who do not deserve it?

By becoming all the things the names of Hosea’s children spoke of. He was the rightful king of Israel, not some pretender like Jehu. But he was punished with bloodshed and death on a hill outside Jerusalem. Jesus was the Father’s beloved. His everything. And on the cross he was pronounced not loved. Hated in fact. All of God’s wrath and judgment stricken upon him. Jesus was God’s people. His perfect Son. The only obedient, law keeping human being ever to have trodden on this sorry planet. And on Good Friday he was rejected. Cut off. Assigned a place with criminals.

God himself has suffered the consequences of our sin so that we may be pronounced loved and his people.

He knows that we cannot be perfect – so he has gifted us the perfection of Jesus as we trust him.

What he wants from us is covenant loyalty. The wholehearted recognition that only Jesus can undo sin’s effects, that sin is wicked beyond belief and that we need Christ to protect us from its terrible consequences and help us hate it as we ought.

This week, please be aware of the vileness of rejecting God. We need to allow Hosea and his vivid image of sin as whoredom to penetrate our consciousness and bring about in us a feeling of revulsion and horror whenever we are tempted to ignore the God who loves us and his words.

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