

Hosea 7:1-8:14: Pure love scorned – a whirlwind spawned
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

How different is church?

How different is it to the rest of your life, the other places where you come into contact with people?

I don't mean the fact that nowhere else in Britain apart from at male dominated team sport events is public singing tolerated. I don't mean that it's only in churches and universities that giving public lectures is still considered to be a useful thing to do. I don't mean that there's almost nowhere else in Liverpool you can get free filter coffee.

I'm not talking about the superficial things. I'm asking about the values, the deep rooted attitudes and methods. How different is church? Is the means of going about our business very different from how things are done in your office, your hospital or some other voluntary group you are part of?

How different is church?

I guess for many of us the stock answer to that question is "very different". That's at least partly because most of us suspect that **should** be the answer!

But I think the truth is that very often, to our shame, the way the church is, the way we go about doing things, is not as different as it ought to be. The sad truth is that churches are not as different as they ought to be.

The good news from Hosea, and to be honest it's not that good, is that this has been a problem for God's people for at least 2,700 years....

The bad news, and it is really bad news, is that for the church not to be different, really different, radically different, is totally disastrous.

In these two chapters of Hosea we see that the church of that period, the nation of Israel, has become the same as the world in two vital areas where they needed to be different. And, as a result, when Hosea wrote, they were about to bring God's terrible judgment upon themselves...

The passage doesn't split at all neatly into sections – rather God, through his prophet, keeps cycling back around these two key areas, explaining their guilt and announcing his judgments. So rather than looking through the two chapters verse by verse we're going to think thematically about the two ways in which they have failed to be different.

I God's church mustn't run on the world's fuel (7:3-7; 8:4-7; 8:11-14)

The first place that God's people ought to be different is in their dealings with each other.

For God's people in Hosea's day, the nation of Israel, that meant that they were not to conduct their national politics in the same way that the nations around them did.

If we think politics in the UK today is full of backstabbing and character assassination we need to be thankful that, unlike most nations 2,500 years ago and many today, the backstabbing is not literal and the assassinations are only of character.

The nations of the ancient near east were full of violence and intrigue in their leadership. But Israel was not meant to be like that. God had provided their leaders in the past, raising up judges and kings for the nation and anointing those he chose with wisdom and justice.

But by Hosea's day it had all gone to the dogs. Here is the account from the Bible's book of Kings about those who reigned in Israel while Hosea was prophesying...

In the thirty-eighth year of Azariah king of Judah, Zechariah son of Jeroboam became king of Israel...and he reigned six months. Shallum son of Jabesh conspired against Zechariah. He attacked him in front of the people, assassinated him and succeeded him as king.

Shallum son of Jabesh became king in the thirty-ninth year of Uzziah king of Judah, and he reigned in Samaria one month. Then Menahem son of Gadi went from Tirzah up to Samaria. He attacked Shallum son of Jabesh in Samaria, assassinated him and succeeded him as king.

At that time Menahem, starting out from Tirzah, attacked Tiphshah and everyone in the city and its vicinity, because they refused to open their gates. He sacked Tiphshah and ripped open all the pregnant women.

Then Menahem son of Gadi became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria ten years.

Then Pul king of Assyria invaded the land, and Menahem gave him a thousand talents of silver to gain his support and strengthen his own hold on the kingdom. Menahem exacted this money from Israel.

Pekahiah his son succeeded him as king... and he reigned two years. One of his chief officers, Pekah son of Remaliah, conspired against him. Taking fifty men of Gilead with him, he assassinated Pekahiah, along with Argob and Arieh, in the citadel of the royal palace at Samaria. So Pekah killed Pekahiah and succeeded him as king.

Pekah son of Remaliah became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned twenty years.

In the time of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and invaded Ijon, Abel Beth Maacah, Janoah, Kedesh and Hazor. He took Gilead and Galilee, including all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria.

Then Hoshea son of Elah conspired against Pekah son of Remaliah. He attacked and assassinated him, and then succeeded him as king... (NIV)

If you just read those verses you might suppose that it was just a few wicked leaders who were responsible for all this bloodshed. Just as I suppose a superficial reading of politics might have led people to think that Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were just two guys with a problem with each other.

But of course it's never that simple in real life. Hosea shows us how the wickedness of the kings was made worse, and partly created by, the wickedness of their advisers and officials. And he does it using the striking picture of a oven for baking bread. The royal palace and its people, he says, 7:4, are like a red hot oven.

In ancient Israel oven's were mostly found at home as people in the country tended to bake their own bread. But in the big cities there were industrial scale ovens. Huge dome shaped things, some of which have survived till this day. What happened was that the baker would light a massive fire in the bottom of the oven and open a hole at the top for the smoke to escape. The whole oven would get really, red hot and the heat would be retained in the stone walls. When the fire had stopped burning and the hot coals were all that remained the baker would stop up the hole in the top of the oven to prevent the heat escaping and slap the loaves of bread against the walls of the oven so that they cooked.

This, Hosea says, is what the politics of the nation has become. An oven hot with sin and wickedness. The high powered people, he says, approach the king with intrigue. They stay up, v6, all night plotting, planning and scheming. And then in the morning their plans burst forth into flame as they spin, manipulate and kill to advance their man, their schemes, their self-interest.

The atmosphere doesn't help. It's a drink sodden politics they are engaged in. On the anniversary of his coronation, v5, the king himself gets so drunk that he's no longer in any fit state to decide who it's wise to listen to. So he ends up hugging the pagans – roaring up to them and telling them what great guys they are. And his advisors, who ought to be preventing the king from foolish alliances and disreputable people are too busy in smoke filled rooms determining their next political move to help the king.

And then the next king will be no better – 8:4. He too will be chosen apart from the will of God. He too will use the resources of the nation, the silver and gold, for idolatry not true worship.

He too will endorse the new national religion – the wicked idols of bulls that are really nothing more than lumps of metal.

He too will approve, 8:11, the system of many altars that was in direct contradiction to the one altar in Jerusalem that God had commanded.

He too, 8:13, will preside over a people who are so ignorant of God's law, which was meant to be the very constitution of the nation, that it sounds to them like a document from another country – an alien idea.

Do you see the problem? The people of God are running their affairs, running their church, if you like, just like the world works. And the result?

Well the result is summed up by the key little phrase in these chapters: 8:7 – they sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. In days when you had to sow all your seed by hand it was really useful to do it on a day when there was a decent breeze – because the breeze would help to spread the seeds out evenly as you scattered them on the ploughed ground.

So "sowing to the wind" was generally a wise thing to do. But Hosea is making a pun here. Because the word "wind" can also mean "folly" or "stupidity" – like our calling someone a "wind-bag".

They sow to folly, to stupidity – to being just like the other nations.

So what will they reap? What will they gain? Destruction. Whirlwind. Tornado. Can you imagine how frightening one of those must have been in days when most homes were built only of mud bricks and pieces of wood?

The result of running their church like the rest of the world runs is that you reap a just reward – you become just like the rest of the world.

If you gain power as king amongst God's people by the sword you will probably die by the sword.

You sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind.

So what about us? What will it mean for us not to run on the world's fuel? And what will happen if we do?

The New Testament is quite clear that God's people are to be distinctive in the local church just as God's people, Israel, were to be distinctive in their nation.

There are loads of areas where the Bible spells out what that means. But for this morning we're just going to focus on three ways that I think our church might be particularly in danger of following the bad example of Israel and running on the world's fuel. I'll give you the Bible references on the screen but it's probably best not to turn them up at home later because we'll be going quite fast...

a) The world runs on factionalism – we must not (1 Corinthians 1:12-17)

If the world was doing a church plant and sending two of the leaders of the church to run it what would be the criteria for deciding which church you went to?

Well I imagine that for many people one of the key issues would be which leaders you like best. Steve or Maurice? Tom or Jeremy?

That must not be how it works here. If you sow that wind you will reap the appropriate whirlwind. If you treat your leaders like factions, your leaders will end up lording it over you like faction leaders.

Avoiding that kind of factionalism is one of the key reasons that, as a church, we are asking people to go to the church plant not simply letting everyone decide for ourselves.

As a church leadership we try very hard not to care which of us you like more. And it's hard for us to do that – and I'm sure it's hard for you too.

Because the temptation for leaders is to create our own power base in the church. And the temptation for you is to try and divide the leaders to get your own way.

So when you are living in a way that is disobedient or foolish our principle as elders is not let people

choose which church leader you see to talk about that. Because we don't want you to think that you can pick the person who is most likely to say what you want to hear.

b) The world runs on consumerism – we must not (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)

If you join the local Labour party wanting to be a candidate and all you ever get to do is put leaflets through doors then you'll leave and go somewhere else.

And it's tempting to bring that attitude to the church too. I decide what my gifts are. And if I can't use the gifts I want to then the church must be suppressing me so I will go somewhere else.

The trouble is that if you think that you've got everything the wrong way round – just like the kings and courtiers of Hosea's day. They thought the nation had been given to them so they could get wealth and power. We think the church is given to us so that we can find fulfillment and significance.

But the reality is that you have been given to the church to build other people up by exhausting yourself, giving yourself, in service to others doing anything you are capable of doing that needs doing.

And if we don't take heed of this? Well the leaders will just do the bits of work we want – we'll preach nice sermons but never confront anyone's sin individually because it's too much like hard work.

And the church members will be great at doing the jobs people want to do. But nobody will do the things that don't fulfill anyone. No one will empty the bins on Sunday night, or take down the banners, or look after the babies at the church weekend, or give money, or welcome new people who don't quite fit in. And the church will die.

c) The world runs on strength – we must not (1 Corinthians 4:8-13)

Humanly speaking it's completely mad to take 20 of your keen, committed people and send them away to start another church. Not a branch of our church so we can expand a Starbucks like empire across the city. But a completely new church. That will run itself. That will be independent. That people will go to who might otherwise have come to this church.

Our church will be smaller when those people leave. It will be poorer. It will be weaker.

The world will say that is a mad strategy. Because we gain nothing from it at all. The kings of Israel

long ago and the builders of “international ministries” today were all about consolidating power. Bringing it together. Pooling resources.

But the world runs on strength – and we must not.

In the way we deal with each other in the family of the church, the way we choose our leaders and run our meetings we must not run on the world’s fuel.

2 God’s church mustn’t fight with the world’s weapons (7:8-8:3; 8:8-10)

The second place that God’s people ought to be different is in their dealings with the rest of the world. We are not meant to secure our place in the world in the same way as any other organisation or business.

For God’s people in Hosea’s day that meant that they were not to conduct their international politics in the same way that the nations around them did.

What happened in international politics then was exactly the same as what happens now. There were a few powerful countries in the world. Every other country then basically picks one powerful country to be aligned with and then gets that nation’s weapons in return for allowing army bases, sharing intelligence and joining “wars on terror”.

In Hosea’s day there were two really powerful countries – Egypt and Assyria. And the other countries would align themselves with one superpower or the other. Basically it was an international protection racket.

The trouble for Israel in Hosea’s day was twofold.

Firstly they shouldn’t have been entering into such agreements at all. They were almost always made in the name of the gods, the idols of those nations. They usually involved the kings of Israel, supposedly chosen by God, bowing down to some pagan despot.

And they always showed that Israel was failing to trust God to be their protector, warrior and leader – which is what he had always promised and always been.

What are they like? Well, Hosea says, returning to his baking analogy, they are like a flat cake not turned over – half baked. Scorched on one side and raw and doughy on the other. Useless.

The second problem was that having disobeyed god by making these agreements Israel couldn’t even make up its mind whose side it wanted to be on.

They mix, 7:8, with all the nations. They have been flip-flopping for so long that their payments to foreign lords have sapped all the strength and money out of the country and they haven’t even noticed – they are like a man who thinks he’s in his prime but to any careful observer the tell tale gray hairs are all too obvious.

They’re like a dove, 11. We tend to think of a dove as a symbol of purity – which it is sometimes in the Bible. But here it’s a symbol of senselessness, daftness, stupidity and indecision. Perhaps we’d be better saying they’re pigeon brained. One minute they turned to Egypt for assistance, the next minute to Assyria.

In fact, 7:14, they’ll turn anywhere apart from to God! They claim, 8:3, to know God – but the reality is that they have, 8:1, rejected his covenant, rebelled against his law and 8:3 rejected what is good.

The result? Well if Israel wants to play international politics with the big boys God will let her. And then she’ll find out just what a minnow she really is. What will happen when Israel mixes with the nations? 8:8 – she’ll be swallowed up without a trace.

The final result will be, 8:13, that they will return to Egypt. Historically a few of the people who fled Israel when it was invaded did go to Egypt. But this verse is saying more than that. It’s saying that, metaphorically, they’ll go back where they came from. Before the people of Israel left Egypt they were not a nation – they were just a bunch of slaves serving foreign kings.

If they want to play international politics they will end up right back where they started God says; slaves with no nation of their own.

So what about us? What will it mean for us not to fight with the world’s weapons? And what will happen if we do?

Well again there are loads of areas where the New Testament teaches that we are not to try and establish the work of the church in the same way that the organizations of the world try to expand themselves.

Let’s just focus on two ways that I think our church might be particularly in danger of following the bad example of Israel and fighting with the world’s weapons. Again the Bible references will be on the screen so you can look them up later if you like...

**a) The world believes in hedging its bets
– we must not (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)**

The problem that the leaders of Israel had was that they couldn't decide who was going to win – Egypt or Assyria? So they kept constantly trying to play one off against the other in the hope that they'd pick gold and be on the winning side.

One of the Israelite kings made pacts with both Egypt and Assyria, hoped the other wouldn't find out and that they'd be alright whoever won. Needless to say it wasn't a successful strategy.

Those kings had forgotten one of the most obvious things in the Bible – God wins. The only way to be on the winning side in the great cosmic conflict between good and evil that is going on in our universe is to be on God's side. To listen to his word and do what he says.

We can be just the same as Israel in our dealings with our friends. We're not properly convinced that God wins. So we don't live as if the only thing that matters is that we and our friends know who Christ is and that he is coming back again.

We tiptoe around and kind of talk about spiritual things if we're pushed but we never really challenge our friends about Jesus. The excuse we give, of course, is that this would jeopardise the relationship.

But what kind of a relationship is it if our friendship stays really good and our friend dies without knowing about Jesus? Will they be thankful we never jeopardised the chumminess? I suspect not.

Israel needed to throw their lot in with God, unashamedly proclaim whose people they were and live with whatever consequences came along knowing that God's people win in the end.

And we need to do the same.

**b) The world tells people what they
want to hear – we must not (2
Corinthians 4:1-6)**

Of course the most obvious way in which most churches in the last hundred or more years have capitulated to the same sins as ancient Israel is in simply telling people what they want to hear.

Israel was determined to look like everybody else – and so, very often, is the church.

In the last century the church has lurched from rationalistic modernism – turning the miracles into stories about very shallow seas you can walk on

and little boys shaming people into sharing their lunches – to utterly irrational postmodernism – telling people we can meaningfully encounter the God of the universe in a labyrinth or an anointed worship experience.

It's the same thing that speakers who want to be popular have done for thousands of years. They soften up the difficult bits and go to town on the bits that resonate with the culture. Anything to get the punters in!

The students here have a mission next week at the universities that I hope you're all involved in. Will you be like Israel? So concerned with being like the rest of the world that you're not setting forth the truth about Jesus plainly to your friends? Embarrassed to have dinner with that CU guest in your hall in case they do some meal time evangelism?

And if you are the CU guest will you be setting forth the truth plainly? Telling people about the cost of becoming a Christian? Or will you be fighting with the world's weapons – making the Christian life sound as good as you can and getting them to sign on the dotted line before they discover the truth?

How different is church?

Not as different as it should be.

Both in our dealings with each other and our dealings with the world we are called to be radically different.

And the fate of Israel, wiped off the map by God's judgment, stands as a testimony to what can happen to a church, any church, our church, if we do not heed the warning.

Andrew Evans, February 2008