

Hosea 1:1-9

I wonder what you would do for a friend? A recent Carlsberg advert had three men in a poker room ring up friends in the middle of the night and ask them to bring them 300 Euros. The friends had to come to a pretty dodgy neighbourhood and into a very unsavoury building with weird people wandering round. Once they had put the money on the table curtains behind the poker players came down and there was a big crowd with Carlsbergs to celebrate 'Standing up for a friend' What would you do for a friend?

Another question is what would you do for God?

I ask this question because today we begin a new series looking at the prophecy of Hosea, who was asked by God to do some very difficult things.

1. Background v1

Hosea was called by God to speak God's word to God's people – to be a prophet. Here we see the call came during the reigns of four Kings of Judah and one king of Israel. Just to help us see what was going on, Israel had been one nation until the death of King Solomon, in about 931BC, when the nation divided into the northern part which became known as Israel and the southern part known as Judah.

Hosea's prophecy seems to have taken place in the northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II who ruled from about 782-753BC. Economically it seems things were going quite well, "Ephraim boasts, "I am very rich; I have become wealthy" (12:8). Politically perhaps not so good, there were concerns over their own ability to stand as a nation and so often they turned to the powers around them for help, "Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless— now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria" (7:11). Morally the nation was a mess, "There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." (4:2), and spiritually it was just about bankrupt, "The more priests there were, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful." (4:7). Here were God's people who had turned away from God and chosen to follow other Gods, "Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver," (13:2) and seemed to think that was OK. However God had a different perspective. The God whose first command in Ex 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before me," repeats that through Hosea, "But I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Saviour except me." (13:4)

The background to Hosea is the call of a man of God, who was to speak the words of the one true God to a people who had lost sight of the fact that it is only God whom we should worship, serve and trust.

2. What God asked of Hosea v2-9

a. take a wife v2 – now that may seem a pretty good thing until we see exactly what God asked. He was to take a promiscuous wife, a wife who would betray him over and over again. Now this is God who hates sin and who sees Hosea as a good man. Yet he told him to take what is in effect a whore as a wife. Through his wife, Gomer, Hosea was to experience heartbreak and pain. What on earth was God up to? But then what God asked him got more painful.

b. have children v3-9 and he was to give them very significant names. Now that is not unusual. Many parents expecting a child will grab a book of names and try and give meaningful names to their children. Others just seem to give weird names like Blue Ivy (Jay Z and Beyonce) or Rainbow Aurora (Holly Madison).

Hosea called his children what God told him to. So when the first little boy pops out, v4, Hosea called him Jezreel. Jezreel is a fertile valley in the middle of Israel. But it was the massacre of King Ahab's descendents by Jehu that God had in mind. So the name Jezreel had become synonymous with massacre. It might be equated to calling your child Dunblane or Utoya or Sandy Hook. I'm not sure Hosea would expect a father's day card from Jezreel!

The girl, v6, was to be called Lo-Ruhamah, which basically meant 'not loved'. What! How can you call your child that? What is God on about?

Then the next child, v8, another boy, was to be called Lo-Ammi which means 'not my people' or no son of mine! I can't think his children would have thanked him for these names. I know Gordon has at times complained about his name and how hard it has been at times being 'Gordon' but these names are in a different league.

A promiscuous wife and three children all with dreadful names, what was it that God was doing to Hosea? This was not great what God was asking of Hosea, which was why I asked what would you do for God? When I am preparing young people for marriage they are full of dreams and hopes. They are excited about being together, hopeful it will last the test of time, thinking about raising children who they can love and who will love them. But here all that seems to be stood on its head and by God who in creation gave humanity marriage to be a blessing! I wonder what you are making of this?

3. What was it all about?

So what was going on here? How was what Hosea did prophecy to the people of God?

a. The wife – the symbolism of taking a promiscuous wife is made clear in v2, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord." The marriage to Gomer was a statement to God's people of what it was like for God to be in a covenant with them. God is making plain where the people were at in their relationship with him. God saw them as having repeatedly broken their covenant with him in the same way that Gomer broke her vows to her husband.

Many will have seen Attraction, the shadow dance group on Britain's got talent. There they danced out a story using their bodies to depict the story. Here Hosea was using his marriage to tell the story of how God's people were cheating on God by their idolatry with other gods who of course were not gods at all even as Gomer related to other men as if they were her husband.

What Hosea was called to do was to live out in his relationship with his wife the broken relationship between God and his people. He was to use his marriage to proclaim to this idolatrous nation their sin. The failed marriage was a clear statement of how God viewed Israel.

b. The children – in the names given to the children we have an equally clear statement of God's response to the unfaithfulness of his people.

i. Jezreel – the child with his strange name was a walking message that God was promising to punish the descendents of Jehu for that action and destroy Israel because of their idolatry. V4 "I will put an end to the Kingdom of Israel."

Through this child God was saying to his errant people. Enough I will destroy you.

I remember once as a child making a model airplane. It was one of those kits you stuck together with glue. Only I couldn't do it. Everything was going wrong and in the end in a fit of pique I smashed it to pieces.

Well what we have here is certainly not a fit of pique but God has it were come to the end of his tether with his people who continue to turn away from him and worship Baals and other gods and so he pronounces judgement on them and their destruction. But surely God would not destroy his people, the nation with whom he had made a covenant? Yes he would as we see when we move to the next child.

ii. Lo-Ruhamah – not loved. What God was saying through the name of this child is that God was not blind and he is not indulgent. Sin must be punished and he will not for ever hold back his punishment. The name could equally mean no mercy or not pitied. God would no longer forgive the sins of his people, instead they would be destroyed, though note, v7, that Judah, the southern Kingdom, would not be completely destroyed which would allow God to bring restoration as we see in vs10-2:1 and in the second half of Chapter 2.

iii. Lo-Ammi – not my people. They could not rely on God's favour because God no longer saw them as his people. God was cutting himself off from those who claimed to be his people because of their rejection of him as God and their worship of other gods.

In all this as one writer put it, "God compares his situation not to that of an autocrat whose orders nobody dares to question, nor to a father who rejoices in an adoring wife and children, but to that of a husband whose wife has left him and a father whose children are like strangers in his own house and fast destroying themselves."

This broken family were a clear message to God's people in Israel that God was calling time on their failure to live as his people in faithfulness to him. No more would he show them mercy for they were no longer his people, instead he would bring punishment on them.

It is a very stark and harsh message to an errant people.

4. What is it saying to us?

God's constant call to his people is to give to him the worship, service and trust that he deserves. He is God and there is no other. If we would be his people, and know his mercy and his blessing rather than his wrath then we must be faithful not faithless.

God's people in the time of Hosea and often through the O.T. found that hard if not impossible. For us who have God's law in our hearts and his Spirit in us it is not the same and in addition we have the certainty through Jesus of mercy and grace when we do stray away from God. However God still looks to the church which is the bride of Christ to live faithfully to him and to his word. However, as he looks what does he see?

Well in many ways he sees a church which ignores the word of God and instead weds itself to the spirit of the age. Many in the church are eager to be involved in gay marriage. God sees a church which rather than being different from the world apes the world in so many ways, such as in our view of power, status, possessions and so on.

However, in case we feel self righteous let us remind ourselves that we too as a church can be guilty of substituting people and things in place of God and our worship, service and trust becomes focussed elsewhere than on God. We trust in our church finances and our ability to employ workers rather than through prayer in God. We glory in our church buildings and the many activities we are involved in rather than glorying in who God is and what God has done. We seek the approval of those around us rather than to honour God. These are the dangers in a church like ours and in these ways we can find ourselves serving other gods.

The message of Hosea was stark to those who saw his life and heard his word. For them it was too late. For us it isn't but it is a wake up call, an encouragement to look at our life as a church and ask what is our motivation and priority as a church? Who are we worshiping, serving and trusting? Does Jesus rule here through his word or are worshipping some other god? "You shall have no other gods before me!" is God's word to his people. May we hear and may we respond to God's word with repentance where we have replaced him with other things.