

We began last Sunday evening in Chapter 4 with the traditional image of the village elders gathered under a tree to hear cases and complaints brought to them for judgement. Hosea pictures God standing before them with His complaint against his people. Chapter 5 goes on to reveal the only true judgement of that complaint. ***1“Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgment is against you”***

The truth is that it is not just the priests who have been unfaithful to their calling and to God's Word but society across the board from the ordinary folk up to the King and his government. This infidelity to God is so widespread that they don't really notice it's there. They have travelled so far from God they can't understand when Hosea says God condemns you for being unfaithful. They scratch their heads and say, "who are you to tell us what's right and wrong, we know what we want and we're determined to go our own way, how dare you tell us we're in the wrong. Your ideas about God are old fashioned and out of date. We've moved on from all of that". One Church of Scotland minister on the radio said that some people in the church wanted to 'cling to old certainties rather than move on, take risks think of God in new ways'.

That's exactly the kind of thing they would be saying to Hosea. All of the true prophets throughout the Old Testament and into the New suffered the same opposition right across the board. In fact it was the mark of a true prophet that if you didn't like what he was saying it was probably God's own word which always challenges, always calls us to repentance and faith, and to live in His way! Hosea is takes the people to task because although they should have been firmly wedded to the God who sought them, wooed them, rescued them and established them in a relationship of love, they had joined themselves to idols. The word "joined" in 4:17 is the same word as marriage and it reflects this parable that was being worked out with Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer, the image of God's people chasing after other lovers.

What is sad is that many of the places mentioned in these verses were sites of historical and spiritual importance. We read in 1 Samuel 7:16 how Samuel, on a preaching circuit year after year would come to Gilgal and Mizpah as centres of worship and learning to teach and proclaim the word of God. Mount Tabor towering over the Valley of the Jezreel had witnessed many significant battles, a place of worship for centuries and still today. Although these places were still sacred it wasn't God who was worshipped. They had been given over to idolatry and the pursuit of pleasure. You have only to think of the use that former churches have been put to in Scotland, buildings some of them with a great and noble tradition now turned into night clubs, pubs or carpet warehouses.

It doesn't happen overnight. It creeps up bit by bit as people drift away: first their worship becomes nominal, a duty performed rather than a joy and wonder, then other things crowd in and demand attention, children sit loose to what their parents once held dear and their children are brought up without any contact whatsoever and in a single generation there is little reference to God except maybe at Christmas or Easter. They don't think of themselves as lost, there is still a belief in many hearts, it just doesn't make a difference, it doesn't affect or change the way you live, indeed more and more it confirms you in your own lifestyle and tells you that, whatever you want, it's OK.

Now all of that is a trap, a snare, a net into which we fall very easily and a world of violence, moral decay and corruption will surely follow. In a week when the scandal of MP's expenses is back in the news we know all about it just as the God who sees everything knows as He tells us in v.3.

He is not fooled by a nominal religion that only scratches the surface of our lives. V4 should scare us when it says *"their deeds do not permit them to return to their God"* It has become so entrenched, so much a part of their lives that they cannot return, indeed they become indignant, horrified by the very idea. Not only have they made it impossible for themselves but the very notion of repentance, of turning to God has become a horror. There is no desire for it in their hearts. This is what Sin does, it seduces you and entraps you and ties you up, filling up your time and your thoughts to make the way back seem out of reach, undesirable. This is the Devil's lie of course. Jesus stands beside us with the keys of heaven in his hands, with the sacrifice for Sin already made at such cost and with the invitation to be set free but if we have become so inured to his gracious words and so determined to follow our own way we will close our ears and our hearts. It happens so easily to the best of us.

We need to be vigilant and constantly leaning upon Him and trusting in Him. The downward path is slippery when God's way sometimes seems steep with many pitfalls and rocks along it. In v6 God takes this a stage further which is even more disturbing. ***6 When they go with their flocks and herds to seek the LORD, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them.***

It's not that God has abandoned them altogether but the situation may be so grave that he withdraws for a time. It wasn't the time this happened. Amos 8 ¹¹ ***"The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.***

It was a very serious time when people stumbled around in the darkness of understanding and no one had a positive or powerful word from God that would lead them or call them to Him. Can you begin to imagine what it would be like? It is one thing for people to be casual about worship in Church but imagine if our church was taken away all together and there was none. It is one thing for people to neglect reading their bibles but imagine if we had no Bible at all as it is in many a household or if it was banned as in many a country today. It is one thing to be glad that our church has a prayer meeting and we give thanks when people pray for us in difficult times but what if there was none throughout the land. If God said to us, you can start one if you like but I am not going to listen, not until there is a change in your heart or in your life. You may cry out to me in distress but until you are willing to come in real repentance and faith your prayers will not be heard or answered.

In many ways this is where we are at in our land already. Few churches have prayer meetings although they would all have prayers at some time or other during worship but to have a real commitment to prayer and opportunity to gather and pour our hearts out to God together is not given to many congregations and then we wonder why miracles don't happen or why our prayers go unheeded or the church in decline. If we are not prepared to change or to take prayer seriously, if we leave it to someone else, more religious, more committed than us then there can be no complaint if we find it has disappeared.

Remember the seed that fell on the busy path, it didn't just fade away and die, the birds came and took it. In Jeremiah 15, ***1 Then the LORD said to me: "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!"***

It can happen so quietly and slowly folk don't really notice and that may be what lies behind the words in v12: *"I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah"*. A slow hidden process that only comes to light when you find you need that particular coat and pull it out only to discover it's rotten. Ephraim of course was the main tribe of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and most of Hosea's words are addressed to them but the Southern Kingdom need not think that they are somehow exempt or unaffected by all of this. They too had their Holy places, Gibeah or Gibeon in the time of Solomon 1 Kings 3:4, Ramah which appears in Samuel's story 1 Samuel 7:17 and Beth Aven which means 'house of wickedness' changed from Bethel, 'house of God' where Jacob had his dream of angels ascending and descending, making his covenant with God. These great centres stood as testimony to how far the people had come from their God and a mark of decline. We can think of the 7 churches in Revelation, what was said to them and what became of them.

Their leaders had moved the boundaries, the moral and spiritual boundaries and in our day we are still doing it, indeed some of them we are trying to put back because the damage is already done; think of our obsession with alcohol which the Scottish Government is trying to curb having taken away all the laws that prohibited it and now they are trying to limit it again. But these are legal measures and no amount of laws can change people's hearts.

Hosea warns them that changing governments or turning to Assyria isn't going to solve the problem: *"When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his sores, then Ephraim turned to Assyria, and sent to the great king for help. But he is not able to cure you.* Nothing less than a return to God and His ways is going to heal their sores and restore their nation. In these days that is a call that is particularly relevant and important not just 'out there' in the world in which we live, but right here in the courts of our Church and in the hearts of its people. This decline happened so easily, so quietly and gently that few noticed it was going on. We need to be on our guard, with open ears and hearts to God's word and a readiness to walk with Him.