

The prophet Hosea preaching in a time of great political unrest is also coping with a wife, Gomer who is consistently and openly unfaithful to Him. This home situation runs parallel to the spiritual state of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who have been consistently unfaithful to their God, chasing after other pagan gods in the same way that Gomer has been chasing other lovers.

In chapter 4 we thought of the village elders gathered round to consider complaints brought before them but it is God who has a complaint against his people. In 5 the inevitable judgement is made because only one is possible, they are guilty of the charge of which they are accused. In 6 there is something of a twist. People were apparently taking on board what is being said:

1“Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.

You might think that Hosea would be pleased by this and even that God ought to be satisfied but the clue comes in

4“What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”

It highlights for us one of the great dangers in our response to God's word. Perhaps something in the service reaches you. You feel that God is challenging you and think, now that's something I need to change in my life or my heart. Maybe it is about Prayer, perhaps about the way we deal with the people around us or even that the Holy Spirit is making us hungry for a deeper relationship with God. It could even be, because we cannot take these things for granted that although you have known about God for many years, maybe even attended worship you have never really entered into a true relationship with him.

He has been perhaps at arms length, in your head but not your heart. Suddenly or slowly, it doesn't matter which, you feel drawn to Him in a new way. There is a word for you indicating that all is not right, or that there are areas of your spiritual life that are lacking and it touches a chord. There are several things you could do with that. You could just ignore it and forget it, you could put it off to another day or you could take up the challenge, tell God you are sorry and are determined to walk anew with Him. That is apparently what happened when Hosea challenged his people and they spoke about returning with contrite hearts. Now that would have been welcome but if it was just a question of a bit of tidying up and not a whole hearted commitment to God and his ways then it will be a bit like the morning mist that soon burns off with the heat of the sun.

They seemed to be saying that if we come to God then in a short time, two or three days all will be well again and we can go back to living out our lives as we please. God is bound to forgive us, it's his job! It is a bit like our New Year resolutions that are soon forgotten or overcome by events but God knows our hearts and he is not fooled by an easy or casual, contrite heart.

We may be deeply moved in church on a Sunday, I hope we are, as the Holy Spirit touches us and brings God's Word home to us. We may promise God all kinds of things in the heat of the moment but how quickly other things claim our attention as the busy week goes on and God has to fit in where ever we can slot him. It is sad when his word has to come to us like

this with such cutting power and there may even be within us a sense of resentment. What more does he require of us. Why does He go on like this? Why are we being challenged like this, why is God not satisfied by what we give to him?

Remember the Elder Brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who feels he has done everything asked of him while his Younger brother is away. He may even have felt some secret envy at the good time his brother was enjoying as if it was better than being at home with his loving Father. What the people were offering to God was an increase of religious ritual and activity when what God wanted was love, obedience and a one-ness with Him. He longed to see them as the sinful Prodigal who came back in real sorrow, leaving all his rebellion behind as worthless, having looked for a kind of heaven of indulgent experience full of pleasure and found a real hell of emptiness and loss away from his true home.

In communion we are faced with a similar challenge because, as Paul pleads in 1 Corinthians 11 ²⁷***Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.*** ²⁸***A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.***

In that particular situation Paul is talking about the deep divisions that existed in Corinth which went absolutely against the whole spirit of comm-**union** and denied the very thing they were celebrating but you can apply it to any kind of spirit that goes through the motions without a real one-ness with God, without a heart that is given to him and truly acknowledges Him as Saviour and Lord.

This is what the whole Epistle of James is all about as he says in 1; ²²***Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*** God, through his prophet Hosea tells the people: ⁶***For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.***

In case we think all this has nothing to do with us we need to remember that this prophecy was being made to a people whom God had chosen, a people who bore God's name. This isn't some pagan group outside the church who are being challenged as to the depth of their commitment to their God.

Hosea tells them that since the time of Adam, who rebelled against God to bring about the Fall, mankind has been consistently unfaithful and God's people have broken every covenant made. Every time we come to what is the greatest covenant of all in the death and resurrection of Jesus that is a solemn word to us and we come very conscious of our own sin and shortcoming, confessing our sin and remembering his sacrifice for us on the cross. This sacrament is for sinners, not for the righteous or those who think of themselves as such but those who come with empty hands to receive from him the bread and the wine signs of true forgiveness and new life.

By the same token in sharing these things we mustn't think that is the end of it. It ought to be worked out in practical ways in our everyday lives. In Micah 6 the famous verses remind us, as Hosea would that just going through the motions is never enough. ***“And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”***

Our every day lives and the way we deal with the people around us must reflect the ways in which God has dealt with us. We need to put into practice the sharing, the forgiveness, the serving which are all celebrated here otherwise it can have no meaning and no real benefit. That, on the other hand doesn't mean that good behaviour and social justice are to be substitutes for a saving faith. You can't buy your way into heaven or into God's favour by saying or doing all the right things. These must flow from a humble and thankful heart in which Jesus reigns as Saviour and Lord. We are saved by faith but a faith that has no expression in everyday life is dead. It is a love for God which floats like the early morning mist but is burned off by the hot sun of our busy lives.

Sadly there are many whose enthusiasm for God dissipated like the morning dew leaving them dry and thirsty for those exciting experiences long distant. We can try to recall them and maybe even to revive them but in the end there is no substitute for a heart that belongs to Jesus Christ as Lord and from which flows a life that displays His mercy, His Grace, His prayer and His Spirit.

When he speaks of a covenant he may be thinking of the Marriage covenant since that reflects Hosea's own situation with his unfaithful wife, Gomer. The people may have been behaving towards God in the way she had been to Hosea. They may well have spoken as people do now of "Love affairs" or of "being in Love" using the word glibly when what they meant was that they were pursuing their own ends and interests, desires and will. They had given themselves "in love" to anybody and everybody both physically and spiritually and of course using that word makes it sound somehow noble and worthy. Nowadays it is virtually devoid of its true meaning of serving others or self-giving; the kind of Love we see in God.

But the day of the harvest is coming in Hosea 11 when they will be called to account. Once again the prophet includes Judah, the southern kingdom when he says that God who sees everything, who does not simply forget or sweep under the carpet the sins that we take so much for granted, will come and judge the earth as he must if he is to destroy the evil in it. Sin has its consequences however much we think that God does not see, is not involved, will forget. That's what makes this celebration season so important for us. It is our opportunity to renew that covenant of love together, to confess our sins anew and refresh our souls and celebrate his life within us:

¹"Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.