

SAYING SORRY

Hosea 5:13-6:7
1 John 1:5-10

Last week we began to look at the message of the prophet Hosea: the man whose own love life became the paradigm of what he heard God saying to his people. We saw how he married a prostitute, and how her unfaithfulness wrung his heart, so that he understood how God felt when his people continually went astray and forgot the marriage covenant they had with him.

In the intervening chapters between last week and what we read today, we see Gomer going astray again, and even leaving Hosea, so that he has to buy her back, as a man would pay for a prostitute to her pimp. Surely a dreadful experience for a husband: but Hosea is determined to mirror God's love and stick with her. We also see how the people of God are as determined as Gomer to turn away from their covenanted Lord, and so, in order to bring them to their senses, God allows disaster to come on them. If we read the history of this period - the time before the fall and exile of Israel, we will see that there is constant political pressure on Israel from encroaching foreign powers. The people begin to realise that they need help.

And what do they do? At the beginning of our reading we see them turning, not to God, but to the Kingdom of Assyria - a great power in the region, but not one you'd want to get into debts of honour with. But Assyria wasn't willing to help: after all, they had their eye on Israel for themselves.

God is angry that they will turn anywhere but to him. Wouldn't you be? He has done all he knows to recall them to himself. He says he will go away until they seek him.

And then they do! "Come," they say, "Let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up...." Wonderful words. And they go on, "Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring showers that water the earth."

This is beautiful stuff. But God is still not satisfied. Why not?

When I studied Hebrew, one of the first things I learned was that every Hebrew word has a root of three consonants. You can add all sorts of things to the beginning and the end of most words, you can even make simple sentences out of one word, but so long as you seek out those three consonants, you will be able to work out what is going on, and what the word means. Which is fine in theory. But of course there are exceptions. There are to every rule in every language. There are words which sometimes drop one of their three letters, or words which only have two, because one of them has disappeared over time. That made things a lot more difficult. My Hebrew teacher was having no complaints however. Hands on hips she used to glare at us and say, "Aren't you all supposed to be theologians? Surely you can see what isn't there?"

I'm reminded of her words when I look at this passage of Scripture, because beautiful as the words of God's people are, as they seek to turn to him again, there is something that isn't there. Something important. Did you notice it?

They never say sorry. They never say that they have done wrong. They put all the responsibility on God's shoulders - he has torn, so he will have the job of healing. They remember what Hosea has been telling them: that God loves them no matter what.

But they forget that love, and especially covenanted love, makes demands of the other. When a couple get married they promise to “cleave only unto” the other. This was also the basis of the covenant between God and his people again.

Now it is as if an unfaithful spouse has returned to his or her partner and expected that things can just go on as before. The hurt of rejection, of broken promises is not acknowledged; the fact that wrong has been done is not admitted.

The people of God want all the love of God with none of the responsibility. They don't want to say they are sorry, or promise to do differently in future. They want what you might call Religion Lite. And they are not alone. Many people still want Religion Lite. They want to be assured of God's love no matter what - just as Hosea has been showing - but they don't want to do their bit in maintaining a healthy loving relationship with God. They don't want to show love or even respect in return. They certainly don't want to find themselves in the wrong.

In the 1960s a novel was published, which was made into an Oscar-winning weepy film in 1970. It's called *Love Story*. It's the tale of two young people who love each other and determine to marry and be together despite parental opposition. And then the girl gets cancer - and so it becomes a weepy. But in that story the tag line, often repeated by one character to the other is this: “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” What absolute rubbish! When couples come to see me about getting married, one of the things we talk about is the need to forgive and keep on forgiving, and how love means always having to say you're sorry, so that resentments have no chance to grow. Jesus knew that: forgive seventy times seven he said.

And it's the same in our relationship with God. None of us is perfect. We know that. We claim it as a truism when we fall down and make mistakes. Sometimes we claim it as an excuse. We know it is true, we are not perfect, we do things that we should not. But we are like little children. When you catch a child doing something to hurt his brother or sister, as a good parent you tell off the offender and then you say: “Now say sorry.” And are they glad to, do they want to? Not at all. Sometimes they will refuse point blank. Because it is one thing being told by your parent that you are in the wrong, but if you say sorry you are agreeing, you are admitting your guilt. And your child doesn't want to do that. No more does your adult. Almost certainly including you. We don't want to say sorry, we don't want to face all that we do wrong, we don't want to admit it to ourselves.

“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” says Paul in the letter to the Romans (Romans 3:23), while St. John tells his readers, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” But he goes on, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Which is a fantastic promise.

The People of God were turning to God as a last resort, and still trying to do so on their own terms. They were, we understand, bringing previously neglected offerings and sacrifices to the holy place to help them seek God's help in their time of need. No wonder God flings up his hands in despair. “*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.*”

The people have turned to God as a last resort, and, as usually happens in such

cases, they don't really know what God wants, or how to go about turning to him. So they do it with outward show. But God isn't after show. He wants steadfast love. That is the kind of love that he has for us, and that is how he wants us to love him - and others - in return: steadfastly, without wavering, without turning aside when other whims occur to us, without letting other matters have more importance than being with him, worshipping him, serving him. He wants people to really get to know him, not rely on what they think they know. It's not the grand gesture - the giving of a one-off large offering. It's not the occasional sop in his direction - coming to church once in a blue moon. God is seeking people who are serious in meeting love with love, and growing into a mature relationship with him.

Turning to God as a last resort is what many people still do. But God as a last resort doesn't usually lead to mature faith. God wants a depth of faith that includes repentance. If we cannot allow God to tell us what we do wrong, if we cannot admit to God that we have not been in the right, then our relationship can never be deep, trustful and rewarding. But if we do, then there is no end to the blessings of being forgiven, of living at one with our loving Saving Creator God.