

TAKE WORDS

Hosea 14

Matthew 5:33-37

James 2:14-24

Today we finish our time with the prophet Hosea, and we find him reiterating his basic message: that if his people will return to God, then, no matter that they have been far, far from God, they will find forgiveness. He again urges them to return to God, and he tells them what to take with them: they should take words.

Words? What use are words? We are surrounded by words, written words, spoken words, sung words. It is so hard for us to get away from words. Just think for a moment of the places you have found words this morning: Maybe from other members of your household; maybe you have read a newspaper or a book - or even the side of the cornflakes box; maybe you have had the television or the radio on; when you came through the door of the church I hope that someone spoke with you. And since you have been here I have been speaking and we all have been singing and we have read from Scripture. So many words. We live in a wordy world.

But of these words, which of them are meaningful? Well, again it depends what you mean by that. Meaningful words need not always be difficult or seem important. "Breakfast is ready" is a most meaningful sentence - at the appropriate time. In the manse it was an important sentence at about 7.45. But now its time is passed and it doesn't matter any more.

Meaning comes in simple communication like that. It also comes with deeper concern: "How are you?" Meaning comes in an exchange of news and views. Meaning comes in learning and in praising and in promising. And some words have their time of meaning and then we move on, while others, once spoken, change the course of our lives - or may change the course of history.

Take words, said Hosea, and return to the Lord. I like to imagine him standing by some altar or shrine and speaking dramatically. "Take ... (he gestures to the altar)... Words!" Take words - but what use are words? Surely the people must have expected to be told to take something else. To take offerings - extravagant, rich offerings, to take their food and drink, their livestock and livelihood and return to the Lord. That - or more - was what was demanded by the false religions they had turned aside to. But Hosea tells them just to take words.

Words, mind you, were important. We live surrounded by words. We learn to read and then hardly notice the amount of information, the sheer volume of text that we absorb daily. But Hosea was taking to a largely oral culture. They had writing, of course. They had the first parts of Scripture, amongst other things. But that was not for everyone. For most people the spoken word was the important thing, and deals were agreed and witnessed and made legal without a single pen scraping over a single piece of papyrus!

Remember that when Boaz took on Naomi's field and agreed to marry Ruth, he and the next-of-kin agreed the deal with words and the exchange of sandals. No written details needed, but the agreement was as binding as any long document drawn up by one of our own top lawyers.

So when Hosea said "Take words" the people understood. He didn't mean that

they should make a casual return to God. They were to take sincere words, not the empty protestations of the past. In fact Hosea gave them the words which they were to use. When something is important, we often want to think out first what we are to say.

Couples come to me to talk about their weddings, and one of the matters that we have to discuss is just what they will promise. There are three versions of vows in the Church of Scotland Book of Order, and none of them is the traditional “Better or worse, richer or poorer” that we most often think of. All of them, including the traditional version, are promises that the couple will remain faithful to each other for life, no matter what, but there are different ways that you can promise that. And some couples want to add in their own little touches, which is fine, so long as they are still promising life-long fidelity. The discussion over what words will be used to make these life-changing promises is when we get down to the nitty-gritty of what marriage is about. The words are going to make a difference, and most couples want to think carefully about just what they will say.

It’s important too that they do actually speak their vows to each other. Wedding couples already know that they love each other, and that they are planning to stay together for ever. But an unstated knowing isn’t the same as saying it: as hearing the other say it - and hearing yourself say it. Hearing yourself is perhaps the most important of all.

In the same way, Hosea knows just what the people ought to say, what they ought to hear themselves say, and he tells them. They are to bring words of repentance, asking God to forgive and cleanse them, promising their continued allegiance, turning from the false gods which had allured them and praising God for his mercy.

And Hosea tells them how God will respond to such heartfelt words - with healing, with love, with refreshment and help. All if they come with words.

I don’t know that we would trust the spoken word in such a way. Perhaps our culture is more cynical - or maybe Hosea was a bit naïve - but we tend to want to wait to see if we can trust a spoken vow, a verbal agreement. Actions, we say, speak louder than words. But Jesus wanted his followers to be people whose words could be trusted, because they habitually kept their word. “Let your word be ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no.’” No need to add even verbal glosses to this, he said. It was a timely reminder. His parable of the two sons shows that he was aware that for many people word and action were widely divergent.

You remember the story. There are two sons and the father asks the elder to go and work in the vineyard, and he says “no, I don’t think so.” But later he changes his mind and goes. Then the Father asks the younger to go and he replies “I’m on my way” but he doesn’t go. The point of that parable was that the words didn’t matter as much as the actions. Our actions show the sincerity of our words, and Jesus’ followers should be utterly sincere in speech, so that there is no lingering doubt but that we will keep our word.

James too is making this point in what we read from him about works and faith. He is not decrying real faith, but empty protestations of faith. He is decrying what we sometimes hear from people who if quizzed say that they believe in God, but whose lives don’t show that any time is given to God, that any worship is offered, that any effort is put into living his way of sacrificial love. Anyone can say they believe in God. James, at his most sarcastic (and he is a man with a fine line in sarcasm) says that even the demons

believe, and they at least have the wisdom to shudder, knowing, presumably, that they are opposed to God. Real faith, he is saying, will be seen by the way that it changes your life. Real faith is seen in action.

This, I think, is why Hosea tells the people to return to God with words, not offerings. Offerings, which are actions, have their place in repentance, in coming back to God or in taking a step forward and growing in faith. But the place is after the return to God, after the moment of promise. The giving of an offering - of money or goods or time or activity - is not to be the moment of promise. If we turn to God with offerings it can look to others as though we are trying to buy our way into the family. Indeed it can look that way to us as well, because very often as we move forward in faith we don't fully understand what we are doing. Saying what we are doing, bringing words first, is important. Understanding comes in the days ahead as we work out our faith with action.

Hosea, like James, was looking for a change in the people when they came back to God with words. Throughout his prophecy his main concern has been for the worship of God. He has been deeply worried by the way that his people have turned to idols - either completely or in tandem with trying to worship God. He now wants to see the pure worship of God renewed. This will show sincere faith

James is looking more for a practical change in the way people live in relation to others. He wants to see Christians caring for the destitute and for neighbours in trouble. This will show their faith.

Both are right, of course. We need to have both elements in our changed behaviour if our faith is to be obvious. We need to have worship. Too often you hear that old chestnut that "I can be a Christian on my own, I don't need to come to church." In theory this is true. But of those who say this, how many spend any time in worship? How many set time aside from other concerns to simply be with God, praying, praising, learning? One of the reasons we come together in church - or in the town hall, or in homes or wherever Christians do meet - is that it gives us a place, and a space in our lives where we can worship. If we really believe in God, then two minutes thought about who it is we believe in should make us fall on our knees, if not our faces, in holy reverence and wonder.

We need to have worship, but we need also to have practical action. James is right too. Worship that does not change us is nothing but hypocrisy, acting. And the changes God wants to make in us are changes which will affect those around us. Perhaps that is why Hosea ends his words of repentance with the phrase "In you the orphan finds mercy" - both in praise of God and in reminder that therefore mercy should also be found with those who worship God.

Today we have come to worship, in a special place where people have worshipped God for years and years and where things are arranged to help us turn our thoughts to him. (Next week we will worship God in a place where all sorts of other things happen, where most of us will have many memories of events unrelated to worship. It will be interesting to see if worship becomes more or less immediate for you then!) If our worship is real, then we go forth from here to live with eyes open to the needs of others. Then we can return to God with words, which your deeds show to be sincere.

As it says in the chapel in Zomba theological college. "Enter to worship, go out to

serve.”

So when we worship, we should take words. Words of repentance, of commitment, of praise. Sincere words, life-changing words, world changing words. Amen.