

REAPING AND SOWING

Hosea 8:7-8, 9:10, 10:1-4, 11-13(a)

Galatians 5:16-6:10

As we are looking at the message of the prophet Hosea, considering what he might say to us today, this week I have selected some short sayings with an agricultural focus. Hosea, like many of his contemporaries liked to use agricultural imagery to make his points, because the people were familiar with farming, and could easily relate to what he was saying. He wasn't alone in that, of course, Jesus was quite happy to talk about farmers sowing their seed, whether in the parable of the sower or the story about the wheat and the weeds, or the parable of the mustard seed. And we live in an agricultural community, so that even though we are not all farmers, we have some idea about the elements which make up a farming life.

Two of the short passages we read this morning are about sowing, and two are about cultivation. Let's take the cultivation items first. In Chapter 9 God says "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel...." Grapes in the wilderness, something rare and precious, though not, perhaps particularly sweet or toothsome. Wild fruits are usually smaller than their cultivated varieties, and often they are more tangy than sweet. Still they are rare and valuable. And that is how God regarded his people: very precious. But because they turned away from him to worship false gods, God began to see them as detestable, taking on the nature of the thing they loved. When we read this it can seem to us that God is being dog-in-the-manger-ish about things. Why shouldn't the people worship whom they chose? Freedom of religion is a widely held human right these days, after all.

But God says that his people became detestable, like the thing they loved. We forget how it was that worship of the baals was carried out. It was through sacrifice, which included the burning of children and other forms of human sacrifice. It was through ritual prostitution, where part of worship was to have sex with women provided at the shrine. It was a religion which helped you think only of what you could get the god to do for yourself, and had no regard for others, or for the community as a whole. It had little sense of justice or fairness, of unselfishness or love. Such religion bestialised its adherents. It is no wonder that over time it did not last.

God's people, rare and precious, turned from his love and justice to the thrills and spills and selfishness of the baals, and so doing they became detestable.

God returns to the idea of Israel as a vine in chapter 10, and the theme is the same. Israel is a luxuriant vine - good fruiting variety, as they say nowadays. In this case Hosea wants to indicate by this that the nation grew richer. Which it did, under David, and especially under Solomon. But the richer they grew the more they turned from God, the more that the new-found wealth was used in extravagant temple and shrine-building operations, and not to the glory of God.

Such pertinent words. Surely it is as our nation has grown richer that people have found less need of God, and have turned from him. Surely our temples are found in fine new homes, in sparkling shopping centres, in splendid office blocks, built to the glory of money, to the nurturing of self, to anything but the glory of God. And surely just this

week we have seen that though our nations may worship money - even if no one actually likes to admit that in so many words - money is a fickle master, who will not reward such devotion.

With their turning from God the people have turned from other forms of authority as well - does this sound familiar at all? Now they say "We have no king, for we do not fear the Lord, and a king - what could he do for us?" (10:3). And so trust is broken down and litigation springs up like weeds in the furrows of a field. You don't need me to spell it out for you, do you? Talk about clear-sighted and relevant! Hosea knew what he was talking about all right.

The other farming metaphor is to do with planting and ploughing - two activities which are, of course, closely related. In chapter 8:7 we have what has become a proverbial saying for us: "They sow the wind and they reap the whirlwind." It's proverbial because it is so true.

Sowing the wind, means sowing just air, sowing nothing at all. But reaping the whirlwind means that what follows is destruction. It's a general principle of husbandry, that when you sow, you hope for a greater yield than what you put in the earth. After all, if you expected only one grain of corn for each grain sown, what would be the point of doing all that work? But each grain sown can yield a whole head of corn, each seed potato buried can give up to half a pound or more of spuds. This is beginning to sound like harvest thanksgiving! But you can't reap a crop which you have not sown, you can't sow carrots and expect peas to grow, or sow peas and reap artichokes. And you certainly can't expect a sustaining harvest if you don't plant anything at all, if you don't put in the work in the spring time. What the people have sown is wind - nothingness, insubstantial. They have put no effort into their lives or their worship, and what they are reaping is a whirlwind - a harvest of fear: fear of enemy advancing, fear of the future, fear of the present and law and order breaks down, fear for their families.

There is only one solution, says God. And now Hosea gives us another picture for God's people. Not a grape vine any more, now they are valuable cattle. Now they are like a trained heifer whose task was the comparatively pleasant one of threshing the grain. This was done under cover, by trampling with the hooves and pulling a threshing sledge behind the cow. Yes, it was work, but it wasn't hard work. It wasn't like ploughing, for instance.

But now the only solution is that the precious animal must be put to the plough. Now instead of the mid-weight threshing sledge being pulled over the smooth ears of grain, she must drag the heavy plough in damp fields, breaking up hard, compacted topsoil. Effort has to be made.

"Sow for yourselves righteousness, and reap steadfast love," says Hosea. God is offering steadfast love, but like any other harvest, first there must be the right seed sown. The people are called to righteousness, a concept which has passed them by, or become relative. They are called to break up their fallow ground - to stop being idle, to letting things just happen, and are called to bring previously unconsidered areas of life into active cultivation. They are to bring them under the eye of God as they seek the Lord.

Hosea really is the most contemporary of the prophets, or maybe the things he highlights are always part of the human condition. Maybe it is part of fallen human nature to seek

to bypass the concept of righteousness. Nowadays we have done it by making it a slightly suspect term, easily confused with self-righteousness - a most unattractive trait. But righteousness is not unattractive. It is simply doing the right thing in the right way, simply putting effort into making unselfish choices, into honouring God in formal worship and in lives lived according to his guidance. The righteous person is the one who lives with humble love, shown in humble service to friend and neighbour - and the stranger at the gates as well.

When Hosea calls the people to break up their fallow ground we hear it as a call to us as well. Where is there fallow ground in our lives as individuals or as a church? Where is there something that we just accept unthinkingly, just do without asking why, or if it is the best thing to do?

Hosea calls us to effort. Without effort we will not reap the harvest of God's Spirit, the fruit of God at work in us. We have to sow to reap. If we don't sow to God's Spirit we can't reap the harvest of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit. Sowing to God's Spirit means opening our lives up - all of it, even the fallow ground - to God's guiding presence. It means living in prayer, making time to study Scripture and thinking about it. I sometimes wonder if the cultivation of our faith is the only area of life that some people think doesn't need to involve their brains. But if we put in the effort and sow to the Spirit, then it is from God's Spirit that we will reap.

If we don't then there will still be a harvest - the land will still produce something, but it will resemble the parts of the manse garden which I don't get to very often - full of weeds and nettles, thorns and disorder.

This is how St. Paul talked about it:.....

Read Galatians 5:16-6:10

God grant that we put the effort into sowing, so that he may give us the harvest of the Spirit in our lives; in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Amen.