

“HOSEA 2 – JUSTICE AND MERCY”

Hosea 2:9-23

Last Sunday, you may recall, we looked at the way in which God called his prophet Hosea to proclaim a rather unpalatable message of rebuke to Israel – and as a way of illustrating the message, Hosea was told to marry a prostitute who would be unfaithful to him in the same way that Israel was being unfaithful to God. The first few verses of chapter 2 (on which we focussed last week) outline the sin of Israel, for which God had decided to punish them. The people of Israel, his chosen people, had rejected him in favour of more immediately tangible things – a temptation which is still very powerful for us today. In the words we’ve read this morning, God goes on to speak of his judgement, his justice, and how that will affect his people.

What we need to grasp, when looking at this prophecy as well as when considering all God’s words and actions, is that God’s righteousness and justice, his love and compassion, inevitably involve judgement and punishment too. The God whom we worship and in whose love we rest is an awesome God who should also command our respect and reverence. And the God who, in the first few verses of the passage we’ve just read, expresses his displeasure and promises his punishment, is also the same God who, in the latter verses, pledges his love and promises his restoration. The two things are inextricably linked. Douglas Stuart, in a commentary which I mentioned last week (*Word Biblical Commentary* p54), expresses it like this:

“The betrayed husband will punish his wife for her infidelity with lovers whose powers of fertility are an illusion. But after punishing her, he will restore her to himself, for he has never ceased to love her. Thus are woven together a warning and an appeal, law and gospel, in an invitation to Israel viewed as a continuum in history. Yahweh calls his wayward people eventually back to himself, to things as they were centuries prior.”

In vv9-13, then, God outlines his judgement. There’s a lot in this chapter about covenant, about God’s relationship with his people, which is almost contractual, like the contractual nature of a marriage – an agreement that is sealed with love. It’s all to do with keeping promises, keeping faith, holding on to the relationship even when the fervour of love might temporarily be blowing cold. So what does it say to us today, then?

1. GOD’S JUDGEMENT IS INEVITABLE

The section we’ve just read begins with the word “*Therefore*”, which is also an indication in the Bible of inevitability. If X happens, **therefore** Y must follow. Part of the reason the Jews were so hostile to the message of the Gospel and, if you read it carefully, the reason behind Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, was that they had neglected this aspect of the covenant that God had made with his people. They were all ready to demand the blessing he had promised, but quite unprepared to accept the fact that God would punish them if they rejected him and his law.

Again, in *Romans*, Paul points to the inevitable consequence of sin which is not put right before God. In *Romans 6:23* he writes that “*the wages of sin is death*”, wages being the expected return for something we do. Now, as Christians, followers of and believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are able to look forward to an assured eternal future in the presence of God, but that doesn’t prevent God “chastening” or disciplining us as we go through our Christian lives and we, knowing what the consequences of our actions could be, have no excuse when we grieve God. Sin always leads to some kind of judgement, and Hosea makes that very clear here with that one little word “*therefore*”. In the words we looked at last week, we are able to sense something of God’s real sorrow (and that’s apparent too in *Ezekiel 16*, which you may have read during the week). But here the mood changes a little as he expresses not his sorrow but his anger – and sets out a plan of action.

2. GOD'S JUDGEMENT IS FITTING

God goes on to explain how he will punish Israel, and he shows that the punishment will fit the crime. (Maybe there's a message here for us in our own prison-happy justice system, which has this week reached breaking point. Imprisonment is never a punishment in the law of Israel and in the words of God. There is always some kind of justice which will fit the crime, compensate the victim and restore the offender.)

All those gifts and benefits which God's people have taken for granted – and, as we saw last week, used in the worship of other gods – will be taken away. Look at vv9-12. There was no urgency in returning to God while Israel was blessed with plenty. Why bother pledging yourself to God when you can get all his benefits without having to make that commitment? It's a question many people still ask today – they see no need for God when they have all they want anyway. So here God needs to deprive them severely to bring them to their senses. (It maybe needs a caveat here to prevent us making the link from the other end – just because people have very little, or are struggling does not mean they are more sinful.)

And in doing this, God will expose their deep spiritual poverty as well (vv10,11) – the other gods to whom they have been prostituting themselves will be of no help. There's a strong link here between what is going on in Ancient Israel and what the fat-cat Christian Church in Laodicea were warned against in *Revelation 3:15-19*. And those words are a constant warning to us to guard against spiritual poverty in the midst of such material wealth.

All the pagan festivals will be stopped – presumably when the foreign invaders arrive to conquer Israel and carry them off into exile. And all this is to be a punishment for the fact that the people had simply forgotten God (v13). They have turned their backs on him to focus their attention on other things.

If we are going to forget and ignore God, he will judge us – and very often that judgment will come through the very channels we have allowed to usurp God's rightful place in our lives. Material things will fail; cheap experiences will go sour and no longer satisfy; attempts at following other religions and philosophies will leave us empty and mixed up.

But just as salvation is meaningless without judgement, so, in God's plan, judgment is meaningless and incomplete without salvation. Brevard S Childs writes that "*Judgment and salvation are inextricably linked in the purpose of God for his people.*" So, happily, the rest of this chapter is concerned with God's great mercy, and is a source of enormous encouragement to the people of God. They can look beyond the inevitable punishment to a time of restoration.

3. GOD'S MERCY IS UNDESERVED

I suppose that's the point about mercy anyway. As we look through vv14-16 it seems that there has been no real change of heart on Israel's part. It is God who makes the first move. Again we see a "*Therefore*" (v14). With God the offer of salvation and restoration follow inevitably on from the declaration of judgement. We're going to look a lot more closely at God's initiative in all this when we consider chapter 13, so we won't spend too much time on it now. Just a couple of comments about these verses.

Hosea, with his adulterous wife, would have understood something of the extent of God's mercy through his own situation. But notice how God takes the imagery and language of sexuality which has been used to describe the turning to other gods and uses it to his own ends. He will **seduce** his people back to him – "*allure ... speak tenderly*". Instead of banning sexual imagery from religion, God rescues it, redeems it and uses it to portray the ardent love and fidelity which are the characteristics of his covenant. At the very heart of all that is happening is a covenantal union. As Derek Kidner writes in the *Bible Speaks*

Today commentary, “*Salvation is not all vineyards and victories, even in the Old Testament [and some preachers and teaches still proclaim that it is], but at its heart is the union of God and man.*”

4. **GOD’S MERCY IS INFINITE**

Our love, patience and forbearance eventually become exhausted. In purely human terms, we would have expected Hosea’s love for and patience with his wife Gomer to have dried up. There are times, I’m sure, when we reach the end of our tether with other people. Not so with God – “*I will betroth you to me for ever*” he says in *v19*. His love is an everlasting love and here he is recommitting himself to a new start. His love is such that he wants to begin all over again.

The very word “*betroth*” signifies a covenantal relationship and speaks of a beginning – the formal commencement of what will be a permanent marriage relationship. That basic idea is also included in the name *Jezreel* in *v22*. You may remember that it was the name given to one of Hosea’s children (*1:4*), the name of a great battle from Israel’s history. But it actually means “*God plants*” (look at *v23*), the planting of a new vine, a new tree which will spread and blossom and produce fruit in due time.

And this new start leads to a love that is “*for ever*” (*v19*). We need never fear that God’s mercy will run out, that it will be exhausted. Even when we are at our lowest, at our most rebellious, even when it seems as if we are being punished by God, he still loves us. Look at *Hebrews 12:5-7a* – they are intended to be words of encouragement!

Finally, let’s just emphasise once again that at the root of all this there is a strong and vibrant relationship. In *2:23* (which echoes God’s words through Moses in *Exodus 6:7*), there is a sentence which sums up all that we’ve been saying. These people who were not loved, who were not even being treated as God’s people, are now accepted back and able to rejoice in God’s restoration and healing. God shows love even to those he has punished. And we can be part of that people. You might recognise these words from *1 Peter 2:9*, but the next verse goes on, in words which seem to be taken from this chapter of *Hosea*, to set us firmly in the company of God’s forgiven and restored people. There is a real link of people to God and God to people. However often we may break our word to God, his promises remain absolutely faithful – and he proved it in sending Jesus into our world to live and die and live again, as we’re just about to remember with this bread and this wine. We can always depend on him.

In the words of Derek Kidner again, “*Such is the God who meets us, exposes us, wrestles with us and, if we will, heals us in these chapters.*” Praise be to him, the “*God of grace, amazing wonder, irresistible and free. Oh the miracle of mercy; Jesus reaches down to me.*”

STUDIES IN HOSEA

2. God's Justice and Mercy

Hosea 2:9-23

The first few verses of chapter 2 outline the sin of Israel, for which God has decided to punish them. In these verses he goes on to speak of his judgement and how that will affect his people. We need to grasp that God's righteousness and justice, his love and compassion inevitably involve judgement and punishment too. In the first part of this passage there is a declaration of judgement, but at the end of the chapter there is also a pledge of love and restoration.

1. God's judgement is inevitable

v9 begins with the word "*therefore*", which in the Bible is usually an indication of inevitability. (Paul also makes this point in his letter to the *Romans*.) Sin always leads to some kind of judgment eventually and we need to be aware of that, even as Christians.

2. God's judgement is fitting

In these verses, it becomes clear that the punishment will fit the crime. (Interestingly, there is no punishment of imprisonment in the Jewish law.) All the gifts and benefits which the people have used in the worship of Baal will be taken away (*vv9,12*). God needs to deprive them severely to bring them to their senses, and in so doing he exposes their deep spiritual poverty.

"Judgment and salvation are inextricably linked in the purpose of God for his people." (Brevard S Childs)

3. God's mercy is undeserved

That's the point about mercy anyway. Looking at *vv14-16* there appears to be no change on the part of the people, but God – as always – takes the initiative. (We will return to this when we consider chapter 13.) The imagery and language of sexuality are redeemed here as they are used to portray God's love and fidelity.

4. God's mercy is infinite

Our human love, patience and forbearance eventually become exhausted. God's love is never exhausted. In *v19* he says, "*I will betroth you to me for ever.*" There is the language of covenantal relationship here. We need never fear that God's mercy will run out.

It is important to remember that at the root of all this is a strong and vibrant relationship. *v23* has echoes of *Exodus 6:7*. People whose actions had estranged them from God are now accepted back and able to rejoice in restoration and healing. We can always depend on God.

"Such is the God who meets us, exposes us, wrestles with us and, if we will, heals us in these chapters." (Derek Kidner)

Questions for discussion

1. Does the judgement of God have anything to teach us about our own penal system?
2. In *vv10,11* there is an indication of the spiritual poverty of God's people, which carries for us a reminder of the letter to the Laodiceans in *Revelation 3*. Is there a challenge there for us?
3. Isn't God just out for revenge here and behaving like a spurned lover?
4. Once again we have the language and imagery of sexual love. Is that appropriate?
5. God's mercy is infinite. So is there nothing that could cut us off from him?
6. What effect should all this have on us as God's people today?
7. What is the most important thing for you in this passage?