

Do what?

The book of Hosea begins, “The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beerī during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:”

You might remember from the last two weeks as we looked at the prophecies of Amos, that Jeroboam, the king of Israel, presided over a period of prosperity in Israel, and during his reign, things were good for the people – or at least good for the rich people: they got richer, while the poor got poorer. We read in the second book of Kings (2 Kings 14:24) that Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...”.

At the same time Amos was active in the northern kingdom, Hosea became a prophet in the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Judah.

Our reading today comes immediately after that introduction of Hosea as a prophet. And it’s unexpected: “When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her...” (1:2a)

Do what?

That’s not what we would expect as God’s good first instruction to a newly chosen prophet, is it?

Go and marry... but not just marry any woman, and not just a particular woman, either. Instead, God told Hosea to go and marry a promiscuous woman.

That’s odd, isn’t it? A promiscuous woman. Other bible translations describe Hosea’s prospective wife using different words: The Good News Translation has “Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful”, the Revised Standard Version says “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry”, and the King James Version gives us “Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms”

Would God really ask someone – a prophet no less – to marry someone of such dubious morals?

Well, he did. And while Christians talk about following ‘God’s plans for us’, and some helpful things like ‘God’s ways are not our ways’... they’re not always thrilled to find out what God’s ways or God’s plans for us actually are.

Hosea – go marry a promiscuous woman, a harlot. How do you think that would have gone down with those Hosea was called to prophesy to?

God sought to teach the people a lesson, and God did so in a strange and unexpected way. Hosea, was faithful, and followed God’s instruction and married Gomer – a promiscuous woman. A woman who would be unfaithful to him. The relationship of Hosea and Gomer was a reflection of the relationship between God and his people. The marriage began well, as most marriages do, but further on, their relationship declined. Just like the people’s relationship with God began well and had become bad by the time of King Jeroboam, and the prophets Amos and Hosea.

God knew that Gomer would be unfaithful and he used that knowledge to teach the people of ancient Israel a lesson.

We’ve had some thought in our family about naming children in recent times, and I have to say that James is a particularly fine name. But whatever names we choose, it’s a really important choice that we make.

I've known Christian families that choose biblical names for their children so that their non-Christian friends will be interested in finding out the stories behind the originals... I guess it might work.

You can get books of baby names which tell you what the names mean, so you can find a name that suits the character of your child – or at least suits the character you aspire to for your child. Richard means 'brave ruler' for instance, or Elizabeth is "my God is an oath"

Those meanings can be important, and here, the names of Hosea and Gomer's children – or at least the name of Gomer's children, because they may well have had a different father, are used as prophecies. The first child, Jezreel, was a reminder of the events 1 Kings chapter 21 where Ahab's wife Jezebel arranged the murder Naboth so that Ahab could seize Naboth's vineyard.

The name of Gomer's second child, a daughter, was Lo-Ruhamah (which means "not loved"). It's often suggested that Hosea was not the father – that she was a result of Gomer's unfaithfulness – and it seems that Hosea didn't have the love that it's expected for a father to have for his children. That was a reflection for the lack of love between God and his people.

And the third child's name was Lo-Ammi (which means "not my people"). Hosea may well not have been Lo-Ammi's father either. The name reflects the breaking of the bond between father and child. Beyond simply 'not loved' to 'not mine'.

Over a period of a few years, God called Hosea to prophecy to the people through the naming of his children.

Do what?

And what do such prophecies mean? Was God ending the covenant with his people?

No... but.

No, the covenant wasn't ending, but there was a consequence in the people breaking it. Israel's salvation was by grace through faith and not through works of the law. The salvation would ultimately come about through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But here, in this strange way, God used Hosea's family to call the people back to him. To reestablish their part in the covenant. As we heard in our New Testament reading, Paul would later make the same call, but to the Colossians – because the Colossians, like the ancient Israelites had been led away from God. In the case of the Colossians, they were led away by false prophets. They were deceived. So Paul told them: When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. (Col 2:13-14)

The Colossians had fallen into their old ways – they forgot the forgiveness they had in Jesus, they forgot grace. Paul reminded them of the forgiveness they had, and called them back to God. And we have that same forgiveness – whatever we might have done has been put aside by God, and we are made alive with Jesus.

Hosea used the story of he and Gomer and their family as a way to speak to the people about their own unfaithfulness to God. The nation paid a heavy price for its unfaithfulness, and the nation's reconciliation with God would not be easy, just like it was not easy for Hosea and

Gomer to reconcile. Similarly, it's not easy for us to put aside all the concerns and things of the world that pull us away from our faith in Jesus.

But even when people – when we, like the ancient Israelites – are unfaithful, God provides a way back to him, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Again, as Paul said, the charge [...] which stood against us and condemned us; [God] has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

We as Christians are called to turn to Jesus in faith, and also to grow in that faith – to grow in the knowledge and love of God. And that knowledge and love of God isn't gained through piety or acts of charity or church membership, but it's gained by living out our faith – doing our best to live as the people God wants us to be. Yes, reading the bible is good and coming to church is good and giving to the poor is good, but it's not simply about what we do, it's about who we are: Being part of the body of Christ, being witnesses to Jesus, and being changed as we walk in his ways here.

God won't ever give us up as his children regardless of how unfaithful we have been. He loves us too much. At the same time, he can't overlook what we've done wrong because of the damage it does and will continue to do as long as we hold on to our those things. Our closeness to God is broken because sin offends God. We can become preoccupied with particular sins, but all sin, at its heart, is simply us not doing what God wants us to do. Not doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God as Micah prophecies. Sin hurts us because sin always has negative consequences and cuts us off from others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. God had to find a way to comfort us and heal us-and the way he found was through Christ's death on the cross.

Jesus came into the world for a purpose, and that purpose was to die on the cross, the just for the unjust. When Jesus died for us, he took away our sins and nailed them to the cross. In that, he provided the reconciliation and redemption that the prophet Hosea foreshadowed when he said “[You] will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’” (2:10)

Hosea's family no doubt provided juicy gossip for the people. But as they listened to the gossip – the story of the prophet with an unfaithful wife and strangely named children, they learned about God's love for his people. They learned about their own unfaithfulness to God, and God's faithfulness to them. It provided hope that they – and we - could be changed, forgiven and saved.

In the letter to the Colossians Paul encourages his readers to be rooted in Christ. Israel in Hosea's time didn't have those firm roots, so it's no wonder that they drifted away from God.

But even so, many people in the world today drift away from God, too. There are so many people today who believe that if they can simply do this or that, then their lives will be fulfilled. But so often those things are not achieved, or if they are, then people find something else to long for.

Hosea was God's prophet – but also very human. Like most of the prophets we encounter in the Old Testament, he didn't have a good time of it. God gave him an odd instruction, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman”, and Hosea didn't say “do what?” – he went and did it. And again in the strange naming of his children. It's fair to say it wasn't a model marriage, and I doubt very much that it would have been a happy family.

But Hosea was faithful.

When we're challenged by God – and I don't think that's likely to be a direct instruction from God like Hosea received, and nor do I think it's likely to be to marry a promiscuous person. But we will be challenged. Maybe from reading the bible, maybe from a prayer or feeling, maybe from a peer or from a faithful person near to you. What is suggested might seem strange or odd, or it might be scary, or it might just be unfamiliar. Make your bible reading a bit more systematic. Read the Old Testament as well as the New. Set some time aside to pray. Try out Christian meditation. Reach out to someone you wouldn't normally talk to. Share your faith with someone. Invite someone to church.

Do what?

None of those things are particularly hard or onerous but they are often unfamiliar and may be a bit scary. But we need to be faithful, just as Hosea was.

One of the sayings that is popular in wider society is that our faith is a private thing – we shouldn't talk about it in polite company. While I think that our faith is personal, I don't think it should be private, because Jesus calls us to a public faith: to be his witnesses.

Again, it shouldn't be about what we do, but about who we are. We shouldn't have a list of all the things Christians should do, and tick them off one by one. If we find ourselves doing that, we'll have tricked ourselves into believing that we can earn our relationship with God, and we'll find ourselves judging those who have done slightly less than we have.

Paul says “do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you.” (Col 2:16-18)

I'm sure in his time Hosea had been judged by those around him, even as he was following God's ways to the letter. Let's not judge others like that.

Let's hold fast instead to what Jesus has done for us, let's live lives that are faithful, and reflect God's faithfulness to us. And even when we're challenged, let's know in our hearts Paul's bold declaration to the Colossians, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.”

Amen