

It is time to seek the Lord

The sermon given at Evensong on 17 February 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Hosea 10:1-8, 12; Galatians 4:8–20

Hosea 10:12

*Sow for yourselves righteousness;
Reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground;
For it is time to seek the Lord,
That he may come and rain righteousness on you*

This verse from the climax of the first reading is full of agricultural metaphors: sowing; reaping; ploughing; watching the seasons; waiting for rain.

The implication is that Israel has not been a very good farmer; she's neglected her spiritual inheritance; she's let it lie fallow: and as a result, it's gone wild and is no longer fruitful. And much of what the prophet has said before this verse is a warning of coming judgement, again scattering his warning with farming metaphors:

- Israel is a vine producing the wrong kind of fruit, the fruit of idolatry – cultivating the wrong gods.
- That is matched by exploitation and disregard for law, so litigation springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.
- Samaria's high places will be destroyed so that 'thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars'
- And instead of being able to graze and eat their fill like young heifers, Ephraim and Judah will be yoked and forced to pull the plough.

The idea here which is still relevant for us is that one's relationship with God cannot be taken for granted and can't be left to look after itself – like the land, our faith requires good husbandry if it is to flourish and be fruitful.

So let me ask you: “What do you do to keep your relationship with God healthy and in a good state of repair?” One aspect of that will be spiritual and religious – as a minimum, a person’s Christian faith has to be nurtured by coming to church reasonably regularly and receiving Holy Communion. Why? Because our faith is corporate. It isn’t just a private and personal lifestyle choice. Jesus summarised the Law as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbour as yourself. So our faith is relational; the church is where we learn to practise loving those annoying people, our neighbours, in all their difference and awkwardness, so that we can become a bit more aware of our own awkwardness as well, and allow God to work on it. The notion that I can say my prayers by myself at home without being part of a church and still be just as good a Christian, is at best eccentric, and at worst risks simply using God to reinforce and legitimise my own prejudices.

Having said that, private prayer is of course important, alongside corporate worship. It is in personal prayer that we can open up our personal concerns more fully, our hopes and struggles, our anxieties and joys, and bring before God the people we love and care about and the situations on our hearts.

Bible reading is also important, whether alone or with others, in church or in a house group. As we gather around the Scriptures we can pay attention to the Word of God in Christ. We listen to God and don’t just talk to him. And as we listen, so we become more aware of his presence in our lives and in the world. So paying attention to Bible, prayer and corporate worship will help to till the soil of our spiritual lives.

But Hosea wasn’t simply berating the Israelites because they weren’t coming to church; it was also because they were promoting injustice. Not only were they not loving their neighbour, they were actively exploiting their neighbour. Lies, deceit and violence were the natural consequences of worshipping idols of money and power and unlimited freedom. Good things had been corrupted and abused.

The assumption throughout the Old Testament prophets is that where the spiritual relationship is right; where people’s hearts are turned to God and open to God, then

social justice will follow; the poor will prosper, the hungry will be fed, those trapped in debt and other forms of captivity will be set free and the oppressed will find justice.

So the prophet's call in this verse (*Hos 10:12*) is a summons to conversion, to turn around; to change direction; to start paying attention to things neglected. It is time to seek the Lord! So break up the fallow ground. Do some weeding in your life. Make some space for God so that you can hear his voice and discern his calling for you to become more the person he longs for you to be. If the ground has been prepared, if it has been opened up and the thorns cleared away, it will soak up the rain and become fruitful.

“It is time to seek the Lord.” Says the prophet, “that he may come and rain righteousness on you.”

God is always wanting to pour out his grace and his love; he's always inviting us to receive so that we can go out and give. But when the ground is fallow, hard and unresponsive, God's grace makes no impact. Sometimes our hearts have to be broken up by tragedy or a sense of helplessness, before we turn and seek the Lord and receive what he offers.

Let's not wait for that emergency: sow for yourselves righteousness; open up to God; and open up to your neighbour and all humanity; seek a deeper communion; show solidarity with the poor. And he will come and rain righteousness upon you, blessing you with a deeper knowledge of his love, and making you in turn a blessing to others.