

HOSEA CHAPTER 14

This week Cannes is in the middle of the 62nd annual film festival.

Often, films are about sex and violence and massive profits – but there are exceptions. Films are a powerful medium of communication, and when they set out to make a moral, social or political point they can have a huge and beneficial impact.

One film like that which has some relevance to our Bible reading today was Gran Torino – a low budget film with only one famous actor director, Clint Eastwood.

At 78 years of age he puts in a masterful performance as Mr Kowalski, a Polish immigrant who dislikes other immigrants. A veteran of the Korean war, Mr Kowalski is a white racist who doesn't like Italians, Mexicans, Jews, blacks or Asians. His pride and joy is his ageing Ford Gran Torino car, made at the Detroit factory where he'd worked – a symbol of the America he once knew. 'Walt' – call me Mr Kowalski, is a grouchy grumpy old man who growls at his Asian Korean neighbours.

But, gradually, through their kindness and the threats against them from a local gang, Mr Kowalski is drawn into involvement with them. Slowly he begins to change and comes to appreciate them and care for them. In the film's dramatic climax he sacrifices his life so that the younger members of his neighbour's family will no longer be victimised by violent local bullies.

This is a story of redemption which gives us hope and reminds us that personal change and redemption is a choice. It shows that this personal change is possible and so we don't need to become grumpy old men or women.

Our reading today was from the book of Hosea. In order to make sense of our reading, we first of all need to take a look at the background. Hosea was a prophet who lived some 800 years before Christ was born when Israel was well into the downward path which would lead to their eventual military defeat and exile. Like the film *Gran Torino*, it's a story of redemption reflected in the life of one man - the prophet Hosea.

In chapter 1 Hosea is instructed by God to marry an unfaithful woman called Gomer. They have two sons and a daughter in quick succession, – who may not all have been sired by Hosea, the wording of chapter 1 leaves this in some doubt – but then she leaves him and becomes a prostitute. Then in chapter 2 God says to Hosea tell the Israelites they're just a collection of Gomers – they chase after other Gods just like Gomer chases after other men. In much of the rest of the book God is effectively pursuing divorce proceedings against the Israelites – the text is in the format of a lawsuit of those days. He's saying that the Israelites have broken their covenant – equivalent to a marriage covenant – with him. He's saying that they are guilty of spiritual adultery.

You see God had chosen the nation of Israel as his 'wife' when he made a covenant with them – I will be your God and you will be my people – that's what the OT is all about.

He'd chosen them and they had agreed. He led them out of slavery in Egypt, he guided them through the desert, he brought them to the Promised Land and gave that Land to them. He blessed them and spoke of their future when his Messiah would come and he would use his people to bless the whole world.

But just like Hosea's wife Gomer, God's wife had other ideas. Israel sank deeper and deeper into idolatry and immorality. She turned from God to worship Baal – a fertility god with drunken orgies. There was corruption and political upheaval and through

Hosea taking back his wife, God uses him to prophesy, to speak to Israel and seek to win her back for God.

Then in chapter 12 God says you think you can trust the Egyptians and the Assyrians to save you more than you can trust me – well think again.

In Hosea God is likening his relationship with the Israelite nation to that of a man – Hosea – married to an unfaithful wife. God was rejected by the Israelite nation as they turned to other Gods just as Hosea was rejected by his wife as she turned to other men and eventually left him to be a prostitute.

Imagine how much Hosea must have suffered as he tried to follow God's will for his life in what must have been a very unhappy marriage – and imagine how much God suffers when we turn away from him in sin or spiritual adultery.

Hosea's marriage problems seem to have been ordained by God, but we can have marriage problems too. God gives us a lifetime of growing together with our spouses, but to make it work we need the gifts of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, patience, self control etc. We also need the help of the Spirit to stop our relationship and faithfulness to God from faltering.

In chapter 3 God tells Hosea to show love to his wife again in spite of her adultery. So Hosea bought her back out of her prostitution for 15 shekels of silver (you could do that with slaves – which is what Gomer had essentially become – in those days) and Hosea took her into his house and told her to be faithful to him. Imagine how difficult that must have been.

In our reading today God suddenly asks the Israelites to come back to him in spite of the fact that they're guilty, in spite of all their unfaithfulness to him – just as God had asked Hosea to take back the unfaithful Gomer.. You might want to open your

Bibles at page (909) so that you can follow it with me. Look at verse 1 of our text:

“Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!” (Ho 14:1 NIV)

So why would God want his sinful people to come back to him. Because he’s our Father. Have you never been angry with your wife and children – even punished your kids. I’m sure you have, certainly I have. But that doesn’t mean you never want to see them again. Of course not.

It’s the same with God. Often we let him down and make him angry, sometimes we even get punished. But God never stops loving us and always wants us to come back to him. His faithful love for faithless people is what makes Hosea chapter 14 possible.

The Hebrew word for return means to turn around and go back the way you came and that’s what repentance is – to turn back from our sin and go back to God. That’s what God wanted the Israelites to do and it’s what he wants us to do as well.

There are three things you have to do if you want to come back to God after you’ve sinned or been apart from him. Firstly you have to ask him for forgiveness – see verse 2:

“Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.” (Ho 14:2 NIV)

Note that God asks for our words and not sacrifices or good works – the Hebrew phrase here literally means to offer our lips as sacrifices. God wants our hearts rather than our works.

I think it was Elton John who said sorry is the hardest word – but we do need to say it. When we ask God for forgiveness then that means we’re still sinners. After all these years as a Christian that’s a hard thing for me to take – but take it I must. Asking for forgiveness doesn’t mean you’re a bad Christian – it

just means you're a human being who realises he needs the grace of God every day. As John 1:9 says:
"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1Jo 1:9 NIV)

In the past God's call to the Israelites to turn back to him had fallen on deaf ears, but he didn't give up on them and he won't give up on us either.

The second thing you need to do to return to God is to acknowledge your needy condition. The first part of Verse 3 of our reading says:

"Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. (Ho 14:3 NIV)

At the time Hosea was written, Assyria was the most powerful nation on earth and the Israelites had previously thought that Assyria rather than God would protect them. But God is saying don't put your trust in people or in material things at the expense of God. Material things won't save us if we don't have a right relationship with God. He's the only one who can save us.

The third thing you need to do to return to God is to announce that you're really going to try not to commit spiritual adultery again. That you're never going to love anything more than our God again – see the last part of verse 3

We will never again say 'Our gods' to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.'" (Ho 14:3 NIV)

You say I can't keep a promise like that – I struggle with sin every single day.

You think God doesn't know that? Of course God knows. Psalm 103:14 says that he remembers we are dust. He remembers that we're frail. He remembers that we can't do it on our own. That's why 1 John 1:9 that we read earlier says:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1Jo 1:9 NIV) and that’s why John 14:16 says he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us.

And if we return to God he will heal us and bless us. Look at verses 4-7 of our reading

“I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendour will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the corn. He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.” (Ho 14:4-7 NIV)

There is freshness in the dew and the flowers – fragrance and beauty. There is protection and comfort for the people in the image of the shade from the noonday heat of the sun. There is stability in the deep roots of the cedars and the majesty of the Olive tree which we heard about from Carol Drinkwater, vigorous life in the spreading of the shoots and the corn in abundance. Here are images of healthy growth which will be seen in their lives because they have repented of their sins and have been reconciled to God.

But we do need to remember that we don’t necessarily get the blessings of God immediately. Like the deep roots of the cedars they may take time to grow and develop in our lives. Sometimes we need to be patient and wait on God. Also we need to remember that the blessings of God are not necessarily a ‘one-off fix’. They need to be renewed each day like the flowers receive the dew each day. For that to happen we need to actively keep our close relationship with God each and every day.

We can enjoy the refreshing love, healing and blessings of God right now. We just need to ask for forgiveness, acknowledge our needy condition and announce our intent to follow Christ. Let us give our lives to the one who gave his life for us.

In verse 9 the text switches from repentance by the Israelite nation to individual repentance – look:
“Who is wise? He will realise these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.” (Ho 14:9 NIV)

These words speak to us today. Some of you may remember that a few weeks ago I talked about the broad road and the narrow road. Again this verse reminds us that there are only two ways – the way of turning to God in repentance when we can walk in his blessing or the way of rejection of God and remaining in our sins when we shall stumble and fall. Which way will you choose today and in the coming weeks? I urge you to turn to God earnestly repenting of any sin or spiritual adultery in your lives and he will bless you.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father we are sorry that we often ignore your will for our lives and remain in our sinful ways. We are sorry for all the times we have elevated people or possessions above you in our lives. We sincerely repent and ask you to forgive us and restore us even now today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.