

Sermon, 18 January 2026, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Hosea 4: 1 - 11 (taken from New International Version):

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites,
because the Lord has a charge to bring
against you who live in the land:

“There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgment of God in the land.

There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;

they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Because of this the land dries up,
and all who live in it waste away;
the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea are swept away.

“But let no one bring a charge,
let no one accuse another,
for your people are like those
who bring charges against a priest.

You stumble day and night,
and the prophets stumble with you.

So I will destroy your mother—
my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.

“Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
because you have ignored the law of your God,
I also will ignore your children.

The more priests there were,
the more they sinned against me;
they exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful.

They feed on the sins of my people
and relish their wickedness.

And it will be: Like people, like priests.

I will punish both of them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.

“They will eat but not have enough;
they will engage in prostitution but not flourish,
because they have deserted the Lord
to give themselves to prostitution;
old wine and new wine
take away their understanding.

Text 2: Luke 15: 1 - 10 (taken from New International Version):

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Book of Hosea is not the most comfortable to read in the Bible. Although God is seen as calling out for the love of His people, when He doesn’t get it, His rage is quite severe. Hosea, His prophet, is called to provide a striking image.

He marries a young bride, who, a couple of children later, takes off to see if the local men can provide her with a better time than her husband. She ends up leaving him until she is thrown out by a lover and comes back in shame to her husband, who still receives her back. It's a strange image and one which also falls foul of modern feminism, being told exclusively from the husband's perspective. That aside, however, it does demonstrate the extraordinarily hurtful power of sin. It looks tempting to start with but ends up benefiting nobody.

God Himself is portrayed as a betrayed husband while His people have gone astray. They have been led there by their priests, a group who have completely let down those they are meant to serve by rejecting knowledge and ignoring God's law. There is a feeling that sin is there to stay. As God says through Hosea in verse 7, "The more priests there were, the more they sinned against me." Indeed, the priests are even said by God to, "Feed on the sins of my people."

Turning religion, especially forgiveness, into a business is nothing new. People would bring sacrifices to the Temple for forgiveness and the priests would take their cut. The more sin, the more sacrifice, the bigger the cut. The economy of sin was already thriving.

It was still going strong in Jesus' time. As we heard in today's passage from Luke, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were not best impressed that Jesus was receiving tax collectors and other sinners, and eating with them. He even went so far as to proclaim that they could be redeemed and saved, and that there would be joy in Heaven as a result. At least in theory, this posed a threat to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and how they kept themselves going. It was not a welcome message.

The fact is that we have quite a lot of difficulty in letting go of sin. It's recognized broadly that we all need to be forgiven to one degree or another. However, the people of Hosea's time did not seem to know what life would be like without it and the transforming power of forgiveness was not readily grasped by Jesus' audience either. It's not as though our own times have necessarily improved dramatically either. The stereotype of the rural Presbyterian is not based on nothing: "Well, if you're not feeling guilty, then you should be feeling guilty for not having anything to feel guilty about !" The immediate reaction of populist politics and their media backers to a problem is not to seek a solution but to

make sure that they know whom to blame, and in most instances that will be someone they consider guilty of all which is vile already. Those of a different, political viewpoint, migrants, other religions – it doesn't really matter so long as they're wrong, you're right and everyone else knows whose fault it is. Blame, guilt and punishment seem to be very much the order of the day whenever sin comes to light and that's nothing new.

None of which means that such is the only way we can react. Sin is characterized in two principal ways in the passages which we read today. In the first case, it is seen as a rejection of God's way and, especially in the passage from Luke, Jesus portrays it as a process of getting lost and taken away from a caring God. In the second instance, it is also seen as a series of selfish actions which end up bringing destruction on both those who practise it and all those around them. Hosea describes it graphically: "There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away."

But there is hope. It is not seen as a permanent state either. Jesus paints quite clearly the pictures of the shepherd and the woman who have lost a sheep and a coin respectively, and the joyful resolve they show in retrieving those. If we do get stuck in sin, like the Israelites described by Hosea, then the trap is bleak but if we can find a way out, as Jesus describes, then there is a whole lot more to find.

That is where the Scottish Presbyterian stereotype comes up very short. God may have sent His Son to rescue us from sin, but our faith is not all about sin and what's wrong with us. It is about redemption and what we can do, where we can go if we are free from sin. We have a tendency to believe in forgiveness as a kind of transaction or exchange. We see ourselves as clearly inadequate and needing to be saved, which God will do for us if we beg enough and promise to follow where He directs. It isn't really the most inspiring picture in some ways. But it stems from a picture which is driven by sin. "Original sin" is often given as the basis for the Old Testament and the justification for the New. However, perhaps what God is really calling for is for what we can be doing once we have been redeemed.

Jesus Himself tells us that there, “will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” The road does not stop at the open tomb. A whole, new possibility opens up but where does it go ? That is something amazing which we need to pursue and explore. We have to be ready to accept that sin is not a permanent state at all but something which can and will be taken away when we push hard enough.

Pushing hard enough is also not easy. Forgetting about what has been done wrong is not simple and it is not something to trivialize. How many times have you heard somebody say in a news broadcast about a crime, words along the lines of, “I will never forgive them for what they have done.” Given the sort of crime which is usually being discussed, we might want to be careful not to be banal regarding such an event. We can’t just state self-righteously how we all ought to be prepared to stand back from what has been done wrong and find a better way forward. At the same time, how much suffering is there still because of simmering hatreds and anger which are never given up ? How many people remain caught in harmful ways – not least harmful to themselves – because they can’t conceive of anything better beyond them ?

This is where the second part of both Hosea’s and Jesus’ messages are so important. It is why redemption is so important. God does not just call on people to give up their sin and turn to Him. Hosea asks God’s people to reach for the knowledge of His way which they have given up. He points out in verse 7 that the Israelites have, “exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful.” But the key message is that they are called back to the way which their glorious God offers them. Jesus puts it even more vividly in the descriptions of the celebrations thrown by the shepherd and the woman on the recovery of their lost sheep and coin.

The problem with sin, apart from its destructiveness, is that it keeps us away from God. Solving the problem posed by sin is not one of simply getting rid of it but of looking to see what else is there. Who else can we be if we actually live and work with God ? We should pray for forgiveness in Church for sure, but we should pay just as much attention to what else can we do as a result of being forgiven ? We should not just be forcing ourselves to forgive others but considering how we can build our relationships with them after that, so as to find what only God can offer.

For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, those Jesus was teaching were defined as tax collectors and sinners. Their status was effectively ingrained and it was not going to go away. In fact, things would have been very different around the Temple if it had been possible to make their sin go away. Their religion was less a case of cleansing or forgiving anyone so much as basically managing their sin so that they could keep functioning despite it.

For Jesus, that was not enough. If people were aware of their shortcomings and wanted to be forgiven, He was very much in favour of that. Not only that though, He saw it as a case of removing what was wrong so that the love of God would enter.

When we ask for forgiveness, are we just asking to be set free from the annoying guilt and problems which hold us back ? Or do we look forward to seeing ourselves in a better place where our failures no longer stop us from finding God's way ? Do we want to overcome whatever may be holding us back so that we can move on, see things which we never saw before or learn to appreciate perspectives and realities which we have never even considered before ?

If we take to heart what Hosea and Jesus were teaching in the passages we heard, the question we ask ourselves on a Sunday should not be, how can I free myself from my problems and wrongs, but, how can I be the person God has asked me to be in knowing Him ?

Not only that, but when we forgive someone who has wronged us, do we actually look to re-set the relationship and move on, trying to build it up and achieve more ? Or do we stick to accepting their apology gracefully but frostily and leave it as a still broken relationship, just without bad feeling ? That second option is not enough for God and it was never enough for Jesus.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” It's easy to pray those words on a regular basis. Moving ahead with them to something even better is a whole lot harder. But God lets us do it and if we try to follow, what we find will be so much greater than whatever we know if we don't.