

## **Sermon Hosea 5:15-6:6 and Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 7 June 2026**

‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’

There was once a man who was the only survivor of a shipwreck.

He was washed ashore onto a small, uninhabited island.

Marooned and alone, he cries out to God for rescue, staring at the horizon day after day in the rather forlorn hope of seeing a boat that might come to his rescue.

Eventually, he decides to build a shelter to protect him from the sun, the wind and the rain, and so he constructs a small hut out of driftwood. Inside the hut he put the few possessions he has with him and the objects he has made on the island. But one day, after he had gone to search for food, he returns to his little hut to find it completely engulfed in flames and he was unable to retrieve his few prized possessions. He was devastated and cries out to God "How could You do this to me?!"

Exhausted, and despondent he finds somewhere to rest overnight but early the next morning, a ship arrives at the island to rescue him. Somewhat astonished when he gets a chance the man asks the crew, "How did you know I was here?" they reply, "We saw your smoke signal". What felt like a total disaster was actually the exact method God used to save him.

In our first reading from the book of Hosea the people were facing something of an impending disaster. The book is set in the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC (750-725). This was a time of huge political upheaval particularly due to Assyrian policies. The northern kingdom of Israel was under threat. Israel tried to make alliances with other regional powers like Egypt, Assyria and Aram in order to secure its own future. However, its diplomatic strategies were frequently unsuccessful. Added to this was the internal instability of the country with political intrigue and murder. Assyrian armies decimated those of Israel between 735-732 and the kingdom was completely destroyed in 724-722. This was the backdrop that the prophet Hosea would have first been preaching to the people.

Just as the shipwrecked man feels as though God has deserted him, the reading from Hosea this morning starts with God stepping back, allowing the people to face the consequence of their distance from Him. In the verses preceding those that were read, there is the threat that their enemies whom God is using as God's agents, the people will be torn to pieces just like a lion with its prey, because of the way that they have acted. But God doesn't "finish the people off" instead God is prepared to wait until they recognise their guilt and to "seek God's face in their distress".

The response from the people is one of urgency – “Come let us return to the Lord”, which to all intents and purposes sounds sincere. They cry out for healing, expecting God to respond to their situation and heal them just like a doctor would do. They are confident that God will come to their aid. They urge one another to "press on to know the Lord". They seem to have recognised the very issues that Hosea had warned them about, that they didn't know God. They expect that God will come to them like refreshing showers of rain in Spring...

But God replies and probably not in the way we might expect – we can almost hear God sighing in the words “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim, what shall I do with you, O Judah?”. Time and time again through the story of the Bible God sent prophets to turn the people around, but the people did not listen. The people expect a flood of healing from God, but in contrast, God finds their love to be just a mere vapor, like the dew that goes away early in the morning.

The end of the passage shows what us what the problem really is; that what counts with God are not sacrifices or offerings – not that these are bad in themselves – rather that by themselves they are insufficient. The people are sincere, however their confession of their wrongdoing lacks substance and real commitment. All too often their love for God is superficial and does not stand the test

of time. God requires what in Hebrew is called *hesed* - steadfast love. *Hesed* is associated with “righteousness,” “justice,” “compassion,” “faithfulness,” “knowledge of God,” and “mercy”. And because the people lack these qualities, social injustice is rampant in the land. True knowledge of God and loyalty to God involve a commitment to a politics of peace and justice rather than one of violence and oppression. God requires mercy and compassion not sacrifice.

‘Desiring mercy not sacrifice’ is a phrase that Jesus himself quotes in Matthew’s Gospel not just in today’s reading but also in chapter 12 of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus would probably have learnt whole sections of the scriptures by memory, and that includes from the prophet Hosea.

Whilst attending a meal at the invitation of a pharisee Jesus is asked why he has anything to do with tax collectors and sinners to which he replies, in a way that probably doesn’t endear him to his host “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”

Here Jesus is challenging the religious order. The Pharisees emphasize purity and sacrifice, but instead Jesus tells his listeners that they should be concentrating on mercy, on healing,

and on relationship. Jesus is turning social expectations upside down and questioning the religious structures.

The stories in our gospel reading of Jesus' calling of Matthew the tax collector, and the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage and the synagogue leader's daughter, demonstrate mercy and compassion. Matthew is shown forgiveness and is brought into a new life. The woman is shown mercy and restored back into her community having previously had to creep around in shame because of her uncleanness. And at the other end of the social spectrum the leader's daughter is restored to life itself.

Jesus takes time with the individuals he encounters and attends to their needs. He doesn't simply use words of forgiveness, which let's fact it, he could have done, instead he acts in ways that restore the people back into their community. Jesus shows us a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God ought to be like – one showing compassion and mercy to all.

As God's people here, now, we are called in just the same way – to have knowledge of God, not just burnt offerings. God doesn't desert us even though sometimes God might feel more distant. We are drawn into a deeper relationship with God, through the good times in our lives as well as the challenging times when things are hard, and we are also to act with love and compassion; but it is imperative that we have knowledge of God as well as to

act with mercy towards those we meet, we can't have one without the other.