



I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice (Hos 6,6)

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“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”. This solemn declaration of Yahweh revealing his will (Hos 6,6) seems to be one of Jesus' favourite passages from the Old Testament. Jesus directly quotes it twice in the gospel of Matthew (Matt 9,13; 12,7).¹ There are five other verses in Hosea where the prophet speaks about God's desire for mercy (*hesed*) more than anything else from his people (Hos 2,19; 4,1; 6,4; 10,12; 12,6)². In this article we meditatively go through these prophetic verses aspiring to deepen our understanding of this divine desire and its implication for our lives.

Hosea and his Prophetic Ministry

Hosea carried out his prophetic ministry in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. According to the description given in the first verse of the book of Hosea, the prophet began his ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE). There is no scholarly consensus regarding the date and duration of Hosea's ministry.³ However, as some scholars suggest the prophet must have appeared on the scene towards the end of Jeroboam's rule, and continued his mission until 722, one or two years before the fall of Samaria. Chapters 14 and 15 of the second book of Kings

give us some idea about the political and religious situation of Israel during this period.

Israel seems to have enjoyed political and economic stability during the reign of Jeroboam II, primarily because there was no threat from any foreign powers during that time. Both Egyptian and Assyrian powers were dormant and they did not launch many military invasions. For the rich of Israel, this was a period of unprecedented prosperity. They lived in the lap of luxury. However, the poor had a miserable existence. Exploited and ill-treated, they had to beg for the 'mercy' of the rich even for their survival. The prophet Amos who also ministered in Israel during this period vehemently condemned the oppressive system that existed there that “trampled the head of the poor into the dust” (Amos 2,7). The affluence also led them to arrogance and apostasy. They abandoned Yahweh and went after Baal indulging in fertility cult and idolatry.

Israel lost its economic and political stability especially after the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III as the emperor of Assyria (743). After Jeroboam II, Israel was ruled by six kings till it was conquered by Assyria in 721 BCE. Five of them met with a violent death. It is marked as a period of conspiracy, deceit, treachery and political intrigue. Israel's acts of moral turpitude continued even when all these political calamities befell them.

Hosea charged the people with their infidelity to Yahweh and their unjust treatment of the poor. Referring to the kindness that Yahweh had been showing them since the moment of their election as Yahweh's people, he exhorted them to be faithful to Yahweh and merciful to their brothers and sisters. The following verses draw attention to God's call for mercy in the book of Hosea.

1. God's Promise of Mercy to Unfaithful Israel (2: 19)

“And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in mercy, and in compassion”.⁴

The book of Hosea is unique in its content and message. The first three chapters of the book are presented in autobiographical form recounting the relationship of the prophet with his wife Gomer.

The prophet, obeying the command of God, marries Gomer, a prostitute, and lavishes love and affection on her. But she, playing the harlot, abandons him and goes after other men. The prophet strives to recover her, and finally succeeds in bringing her back. In the rest of the book God's relationship with Israel is portrayed by drawing an analogy with the prophet's life with Gomer. Like Gomer, Israel is an unfaithful wife. She forgets her Lord, God, who brought her out of Egypt and liberated her from the chains of slavery. But God does not forsake her, he sets out to redeem her. The present verse (2,19) announces God's salvific project for Israel: "And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in mercy and in compassion". God does not say that he is going to forgive her or accept her, rather he is going to betroth her to him for ever!

Israel's relationship with Yahweh is founded on the covenant that he has made with her. That covenantal relationship is restated here using the imagery of a marriage contract ("I will betroth you"). The relationship that God wants with Israel is not merely legal, but very personal and intimate, like the one between husband and wife. Now the betrothal that God is going to remake with his promiscuous bride is eternal ("I will betroth you to me for ever"), that means, even if Israel abandons her Lord, he will never cast her off (see Isa 54,10; Jer 31,35-37).

The prophet further shows four characteristics of God's betrothal to Israel: "I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, mercy, and in compassion". This is God's gift to his spouse. God will redeem Israel from her fallen status, and bless her land and people with righteousness, justice, mercy and compassion. Or in other words, "once Israel's relationship with Yahweh is re-established, then the nation will be characterised

by these qualities rather than by those deriving from idolatrous syncretism”.⁵

The prophet reveals here the nature of God's love and mercy. In fact, Israel does not deserve any sympathy from God. The story of her life, since the time of her election, has been a story of infidelity. Nevertheless, every time she strays, God pursues her and finds her. As the Psalmist sings, he forgives all her iniquity and heals all her diseases; he redeems her from the pit and crowns her again with mercy and compassion (Ps 103,3-4). That is God, he cannot be otherwise!

2. God's Case against Israel (Hos 4: 1)

“Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel, For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land, Because there is no truth or kindness or knowledge of God in the land.”

After presenting the story of the prophet and his unfaithful wife, the author turns to narrate the relationship between God and Israel in the second section of the book (chs. 4–14). This section begins with a call to the people of Israel to listen to God's case against them. The three qualities mentioned here – truth, kindness and knowledge of God – beautifully summarize what God expects from his people.

The Hebrew word *emeth* which is translated as truth can also mean “fidelity, honesty, constancy, trustworthiness in thought, word, and deed”.⁶ The nouns. kindness (*hesed*) and truth (*emeth*) as human qualities appear together four times in Proverbs (Prov 3,3; 14,22; 16,6; 20,28). These verses show how important are these qualities for a human person to live a meaningful life in this world. The sage of Prov 3,3 advises the believer, “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart”. Absence of truth in a person's life can be seen as a clear sign of lack of dignity and moral integrity in his/her life. In fact, absence of mercy is a natural consequence of such a state of being. If a person loses his sense of dignity and moral integrity how can he be kind towards

others! It is also impossible for such a person to know God. Reference to the non-existence of these qualities in Israel shows that the country and its people had lost its worth in every sense - personal, social and religious.

The moral anarchy that reigned in the land is described in the subsequent verses: it has become a place of swearing, deception, murder, stealing, adultery, violence and bloodshed. Such uncurbed immoral living of the people severely affects the environment too: "Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air; and even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hos 4,2-3).

3. Mercy Not Sacrifice (Hos 6: 4,6)

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your mercy is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early" (Hos 6,4). "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6,6).

In these two verses from chapter 6, God expresses his disappointment with Israel (Ephraim) and Judah at their neglect of mercy. His questions, ("What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?... O Judah?) sound like that of a father who seems to be frustrated by his wayward children. Their disregard for mercy puts him in a difficult position. On the one hand they are his beloved children, but on the other hand he cannot tolerate their mercilessness. In fact, the struggle of the compassionate heart of God can be traced in these questions (see Hos 11,8ff). By likening their mercy to morning cloud and dew, the prophet exposes the superficiality of their mercy. If they have it at all, it is fleeting kindness, no one profits from it!

Hos 6,6 clearly states God's uncompromising stance regarding sacrifice and mercy. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings". God cannot be pleased by multiplying sacrifices. What he wants from his people is kindness. Even when they accumulated wickedness

Israel tried many a time to delight God with their offerings. The prophets vigorously attacked such cultic hypocrisy. “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5,21-24; see also Isa 1,12-17; Mic 6,6-8). Hosea describes God’s disgust at their shallow offerings in 8,13: “They love sacrifice; they sacrifice flesh and eat it; but the Lord has no delight in them. Now he will remember their iniquity, and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt.” He rebukes the priests who encourage people to offer such ‘sinful sacrifices’: “They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity”(Hos 4,8).

This declaration of God in Hos 6,6 reaffirms that mercy and knowledge of God are inextricably related (see 4,1). Without being merciful towards one’s brothers and sisters one cannot know God. We can hear an echo of this prophetic teaching in 1 John 4,20, “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

4. Sow Righteousness, Gather in Mercy (10,12)

“Sow for yourselves righteousness, gather in mercy⁷; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until he comes to rain righteousness on you.”

In this exhortative oracle the prophet asks the people to make themselves worthy to seek the Lord. The three imperatives (sow, reap, till/break up), all related to husbandry, refer to the conversion that people have to undergo in their life. Though these imperatives are given independently, they are mutually related. Using the logic of farming we may put the last imperative first.⁸ To seek the Lord, Israel has to break up her

fallow ground, sow for herself righteousness and then gather in mercy.

It is significant that mercy is presented here as the fruit of the harvest. This shows that mercy is not merely a virtue like any other virtue in life, but it is the fruit, the end result of the whole process. In other words, 'gathering mercy' or being merciful is the true purpose of one's life. The people of Israel can not reap mercy by being idle allowing tares and thorns to continue growing. They have to make a decision, they have to till the ground and prepare it, and sow proper seeds and nurture the crop.

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By exhorting the Israelites to sow righteousness and to gather mercy, the prophet presents righteousness as an intrinsic characteristic of mercy. It is the seed of righteousness that sprouts, develops and yields the fruit of mercy. It is such a mercy that is the essential prerequisite for seeking the Lord. And finally the Lord himself will rain 'righteousness' on those who seek him with a merciful life.

5. Return to Your God, Keep Mercy and Justice (Hos 12,6)

“Therefore, return to your God, keep mercy and justice, and wait for your God continually.”⁹

Having denounced the different kinds of sins of Israel, the prophet urges the people to return (*shub*) to their God whom they have abandoned (Hos 12,6)¹⁰. How can they return to their God? The prophet does not ask them to perform any offering or

sacrifice, nor does he suggest any penitential deed for the atonement of their sins, but he only exhorts them to keep mercy and justice¹¹ and wait for their God. Thus Hosea once again places mercy and justice as the most important qualities that God wants his people to possess. This implies that only by building a proper relationship with their brothers and sisters, treating them with mercy and justice can they turn to God.

The next imperative, “wait for your God continually” points to their relationship with God. They need to put an absolute trust in their God in all circumstances, and to believe that their God will be their safety and security (see Isa 40,31; Mic 7,7). The prayer of the psalmist in Ps 25,5.21 reflects such a faithful living and waiting: “Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long”; “May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you”.

Conclusion

“The Name of God is Mercy” is the title of the new book of Pope Francis. The book of Hosea beautifully shows how apt is this appellation for God. It narrates the story of a God who is actively engaged in bringing his people back to him. Though through their infidelity and wickedness they abandoned him, he, like a compassionate husband and an affectionate mother (see Hos 11,1-11), forgives their iniquities, heals their infidelities. He sees people's infidelity and waywardness as the result of their lack of mercy and sets out to redeem them. We hear a prophetic cry in this book to be 'merciful as this merciful God', to share in his mercy as a sign of fidelity, and to extend this mercy as an expression of faith. Mercy, that is what God expects from his people! There is no sacrifice more acceptable than that! 🌿

¹ The only other passage cited by Jesus more than once in the gospel is Lev 19,18 (Matt 5,43; 19,19; 22,39). This text (Lev 19,18) which exhorts the Israelite to love his neighbour as himself is also very closely connected with the motif of mercy.

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- ² The Hebrew word *hesed* which we translate here as 'mercy' can also mean 'loyalty', 'steadfast love', 'goodness' etc. However, it is often translated as *eleos* (mercy or kindness) in the LXX.
- ³ See C.L. Seow, "Book of Hosea", in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York 1996) 3:291-292; D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31, Dallas 2002) 10, for different proposals regarding the time span of Hosea's prophetic ministry.
- ⁴ In the Hebrew and the Greek texts this verse comes as verse 21. This is because the translations, for thematic reasons, give the first two verses of the second chapter of the Hebrew and the Greek texts as the last two verses of the first chapter.
- ⁵ A. A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea* (Edinburgh 1997) 83.
- ⁶ W.R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical commentary on Amos and Hosea* (New York 1905) 249.
- ⁷ The LXX uses the word *zoē* (life) here for the Hebrew *hesed*. We follow the Hebrew text and translate it as 'mercy' as in other places.
- ⁸ See the next verse: "You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruits of lies" (Hos 10,13; see also Hos 8,7)
- ⁹ As an introduction to this teaching the prophet reminds the people of their long history of rebellion against God (see Hos 12,2-6).
- ¹⁰ Hos 12,7, in the Hebrew text.
- ¹¹ The Hebrew word used here is *mishpat*. It can mean justice, good judgement, righteous decision etc.