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# Gaining the Ear of Our People

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*The prophet Hosea provides the model for this challenge about the kind of language we use in our preaching today.*

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The preacher is neither a lecturer nor a theologian, but a herald. Since the message *demand*s attention, the messenger must *command* attention by his presentation of it. In New Testament terms, if 'faith comes by hearing', then people must be made to hear; not shouted at, bullied, cajoled or entertained, but gripped, by the *vehicle* of preaching, so as to give attention to the *content* of what is preached.

### **So much for the theory!**

Why, then, is sound preaching often dull preaching? Why do we fail to gain the attention not just of any unbelievers present, not just of those 'awkward' teenagers, but sometimes even of the 'dear saints of God'? The problem is not, of course, with the message, for 'God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe' (1 Cor 1:21); so perhaps it lies with the thoughtlessness of the preacher who has simply not taken enough time to consider the best medium through which to convey his message.

In saying this, warning bells immediately begin to sound, for preachers should never become pulpiteers or professionals (in the worst sense of the word) who use every emotional artifice, secular gimmick or even gratuitous 'humour' in order to gain attention. But if we may not borrow from the impressive but empty oratory of a Demosthenes, or from the slick presentation of a Saatchi and Saatchi, we may still have much to learn from a Hosea!

### **Hosea — heat, light and power!**

The prophet Hosea speaks to every generation as a wonderful combination of 'heat' and 'light' in his message directed at the 'covenant complacency' of Israel. While the grounds for their complacency were very different from that of western man in the twentieth century, the fact of their complacency (and the resulting hardness of heart) was the same — as was the shaky foundation on which that complacency was built. If Hosea's words fell upon his generation like a sledgehammer, at least he was aiming to crack more than a nut! And if he could be so vivid, almost violent at times in his choice of language, how can we justify the 'cold fish' approach?

Vivid, of course, is an understatement for much of Hosea's language. His words demand attention even when doing no more than describing an actual situation (or making a prediction), without recourse to simile, metaphor, extended illustration, historical allusion, or those wonderful purple passages where metaphors are so mixed as to make the purist despair, but his hearers sit bolt upright! Notice, for

example, the vividness of such 'ordinary' descriptive passages at 9:1-4, where the diverse themes of unfaithfulness, famine, captivity and unacceptable sacrifices are held together by repetition of the twin ideas 'food' and 'wine'! Read through 8:1-6, and 'listen' to the noise: first the trumpet, then the eagle, then the cry of Israel to God, and finally the anguished shout (v 5) from God to Israel. Now read the same passage again, and follow the thread of irony through the verses. Then turn back to chapter 7 (verses 13-16), another statement of Israel's sin and certain condemnation, and ask yourself, 'What do I know of such vividness in my 'ordinary' preaching?'

### **Well, it's like this ... or at least I think it is!**

Perhaps the simplest of all devices that goes beyond bare statement is *the simile* — and which of us has never been attracted by its use? In fastening upon a simile, the brain is more than usually engaged, not merely in listening, but by being forced to make a comparison between two levels of truth, the one reinforcing the other. Hosea makes continual use of this device: he successively describes Israel as being 'like a stubborn heifer' (4:16); 'like a dove, easily deceived and senseless (7:11); 'like a faulty bow' (7:16); their flirting with Assyria is 'like a wild donkey wandering alone' (8:9); and though Israel's love was 'like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears' (6:4), God still viewed Israel as 'like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree' (9:10).

Similes are also used for the certain fate of Israel, as well as for its present state: consider the wonderful series of word pictures in 13:3: 'they will be like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears' (note the poetic justice of the way that their state in 6:4 and their fate in 13:3 are pictured in identical similes), and 'like chaff swirling from a threshing floor, like smoke escaping through a window'. Later in chapter 13 (verse 13), Hosea's most vivid simile occurs, speaking of Israel's fate in the following graphic comparison: 'pains as of a woman in childbirth come to him, but he is a child without wisdom; when the time arrives, he does not come to the opening of the womb'.

What better means can Hosea use to convey the wrath of God, and by contrast the tender mercy of God? The former will come 'like a flood of water' (5:10); 'like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah' (5:12); and two verses later again 'like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah'. In 6:5 God's judgements are 'like lightning', and in the heaped-up similes of 13:7 God is successively described as 'like a lion'... 'like a legend'... 'like a bear robbed of her cubs', and (again) 'like a lion!'

What a contrast all this makes with the similes used to depict God's tender mercy, as in 6:3 'as surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth'. And in his concluding promise (14:5-7), God says, '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 again dwell 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*.'

What can a preacher learn from Hosea's use of simile? Firstly, that (in its place) it is most helpful for stimulating that wonderful, yet often under-employed part of the mind — the imagination! Anything which lodges in the mind not merely as a statement of fact but with an attendant mental picture to reinforce it cannot but be a wonderful aid to memory: and providing the memory becomes a stimulus to *obedience* (as in the case of Jesus' own simile of the wise man who built on rock), then life transforming lessons may be learned.

However, an obvious word of caution is in place here, namely that the simile must be readily understood, so as to *enhance* truth, not detract from it, or worse still to create more confusion than the light it was meant to bring. Hosea's similes were down-to-earth examples of every-day phenomena from common meteorological conditions, local customs, animal behaviour or the world of nature. If a simile has to be explained, it is worse than useless. That is why it is vital to learn *principles* from Hosea, but dangerous to copy his *examples*. An Englishman faced with biblical similes needs a good commentary, or good first-hand knowledge of eastern-Mediterranean countries, fully to appreciate the significance of moving boundary stones, wandering wild donkeys, wine from Lebanon, the devastation caused by wild animals, and the reviving presence of early-morning dew in a parched land. It takes quite a 'double-think' for anyone constantly subjected to the vagaries of British weather to regard the sun as an enemy and the rain as a friend!

**Similes are excellent, but they must be topical, relevant, instantly understandable and graphic pictures with no hint of double meaning or controversy.** Unless these conditions are met, they will detract from the very truth they were intended to enhance.

### **And here's a lesson from a minor incident in the Peloponnesian War!**

As with simile, so in his use of *historical or topical allusions*, Hosea has much to teach us. Once again the best examples are the ones which make their point of comparison even before the preacher begins to do so. Nothing gives a congregation more of a thrill than to be ahead of a preacher, or at least level with him, at such times! Of course when reading Hosea, we need a commentary to extract all the lovely irony from his substitution of 'Beth Aven' for Bethel (4:15 and 5:8); to see the tragedy of the way that Mizpah and Tabor (places with historic associations of the meeting of God and man) had become places where snares and nets were spread. While we do not understand the topical references to Gilead and Shechem (6:8-9) as well as to Beth Arbel (10:14), the significance would surely not have escaped Hosea's listeners. The same is true of the way Hosea digs into well known history to make his hearers shudder at the mention of Gibeah (10:9) with all its connotations of brutality and perversion; and in the historical allusions of chapter 12 and 13:4-6, Hosea takes his hearers back and reminds them of the true character of their ancestor Jacob, and the wonder of their redemption from Egypt.

So may a preacher use newspaper headlines? May he recount significant moments in history? Yes, of course: but surely not the trivial or obscure. **The best historical allusions, or topical examples, are so well known that they awaken clear**

memories in the listeners' minds; and then all the preacher needs to do is to amplify the truth that has already taken root at the mere mention of the event. Simple, but wonderfully effective.

### Lowest form of wit, or most convincing tool of evangelism?

No less effective, as Hosea demonstrates, is the preacher's use of *irony*, which is particularly well-suited to the theme of judgment. This can be one of the most difficult things for a preacher to speak about, and yet because it is such a vital theme, a consideration of the use of irony, pathos and poetic justice (which Hosea obviously found so suited to the prevailing gloom of his message) is not without application today. To think that altars for sin had become altars for sinning (8:11); to think that the laws of God for his people were regarded by Israel as 'something alien' (8:12). How tragic that the special revelation that should have marked Israel out from the nations had been thought to apply to every nation *but them!*

Equally devastating in its simplicity is 10:1 — 'Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit *for himself*'. Or consider the pathos of 11:1-4, which needs reading several times to grasp the tragedy of the situation: here was God's beloved son, called out of Egypt yet now refusing to heed God's call; here was the nation on which God had lavished so much 'fatherly care' giving thanks and paying homage to the Baals! Hence the grim irony is reinforced in the sentence that follows: though God had lifted the yoke of Egypt from their necks, 'will they not return to Egypt, and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?'

Other examples of such 'poetic justice', which is really God's retributive judgment at work, are seen as people reaping what they sow: 'they make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a ploughed field' (10:4). What better way of saying that the legal profession flourishes most in a society of corrupt morals? Even more ironic is 10:6-7. Has Israel made *wooden* idols? Very well then, says Hosea: 'Samaria and its king will *float* away like a *twig* on the surface of the waters'.

At this point we need to stop and ask how far a preacher is justified in using language to arouse the emotions of his hearers. This, of course, is a delicate subject, for while the preacher must never become an actor or a showman, he must recognise that **God has made us as people with emotions, and there will be times when our hearers should be moved to pity, fear, tenderness, love or indignation.** If tragic irony turns to the callous indifference of sarcasm, the preacher has gone too far — he must never lose his love for the very people whose sins he is exposing. If true pathos becomes empty emotionalism, then the spirit of man is trying to do the convicting work of the Spirit of God. If instances of 'poetic justice' call forth the unfeeling response — 'it served them right!' — then the preacher is abusing the pulpit.

### To laugh, or not to laugh?

May the preacher make people laugh? Well, *leap for joy*, yes: it is hard to see how the glorious promises of chapter 14 would not have had a similar effect on the godly remnant of Israel; *make us smile*, yes: at the stupidity of human nature trying to get by without God, as when Israel turned to a 'stick of wood' (4:12) to solve its

problems; but *make us laugh* — not simply for the sake of it, no. There may be times when what the preacher says is genuinely funny — and God has given us laughter. But that is a far cry from the preacher telling a ‘religious joke’ in order to establish credibility with his hearers. If Hosea teaches us anything, it is surely that **the plight of man and the judgment of God are such serious subjects that there is no room for contrived laughter**. Furthermore, it is vital that the preacher’s *own emotions* are fully engaged in the act of preaching: he cannot remain aloof and then expect to see fear, godly sorrow, holy love or righteous indignation produced in his hearers.

### **Let me pause to illustrate my point!**

Perhaps the most common device used by preachers to gain attention and communicate truth is the *illustration*, that most effective (and yet most dangerous) tool. Here too Hosea has something to say to us as we examine some of his ‘purple passages’, as for example 7:3-8. Such a passage almost defies analysis: a factual statement about the sins of Israel’s leaders links the burning of adultery with the simile of an oven, which is then elaborated by the mention of the baker; there follows another factual statement about the inflaming effect of wine on Israel’s rulers, and the mention of the heat of wine leads Hosea back to the oven simile, once again extended to develop the idea of smouldering passion; then verse 8 brings us down to earth with real bathos — the result of all this ‘heated activity’ is that ‘Ephraim is a flat cake not turned over’ — truly a ‘half-baked’ mixture with the surrounding nations!

Equally difficult to analyse, let alone to imitate, is the adultery picture in chapter 2, which springs (as most evangelical commentators see it) directly from Hosea’s own experience. It is difficult to tell where the analogy of Gomer’s adultery gives way to Israel’s spiritual unfaithfulness, but the chapter is no less effective for the gradual shift from analogy to factual statement. Indeed, there may be a lesson for preachers here. **How many of us, particularly when talking to youngsters or ‘semi-captive’ adults at ‘special services’ have found ourselves able to grip our hearers only so long as our illustration lasts, and then lose them as we ‘bumpily change gear’ to the application?** An automatic gearbox may on occasions be better than a manual one with a fierce clutch!

Another example of the apparently chaotic, yet wonderfully effective mixture of metaphor, mixed metaphor, simile and factual statement, with illustration and application inextricably intertwined, occurs in 8:7-10, where what can only be described as ‘word association’ holds together an otherwise diverse train of thought. The daring statement, ‘they sow the wind and reap the whirlwind’ suggests the word ‘stalk’ (presumably left behind after the process of reaping); this in turn suggests the idea of ‘grain swallowed up by the enemy’; the word ‘swallowed’ reminds Hosea that ‘Israel is swallowed up’, and the thought that she is among the nations leads to the picture of the ‘wild donkey wandering alone’; the connection of thought leads to a new picture of Ephraim ‘selling herself to lovers’, and the picture of Israel sold among the nations leads to the bold statement: ‘they will begin to waste away under the oppression of the mighty King’. With this statement the argument has come full circle, for this is the fulfilment of the whirlwind being

reaped: but what a glorious series of pictures have been planted in the imagination in the process!

An equally effective extended illustration held together once again by word association is to be found in 10:11-13, where Israel is 'a trained heifer that loves to thresh'; but though Israel wants the *easy* job (in agricultural terms), she must do the *hard* one: 'I will *drive* Ephraim, Judah must *plough*, and Jacob must *break up the ground*'. This last picture ushers in the thought of 'righteousness sowed, unfailing love reaped', and God graciously bestowing 'showers of righteousness'; and then Hosea abruptly turns to the harsh reality: Israel's seed has been 'wickedness', and her crop 'evil' and 'deception', from which devastation will result, as spelled out in verses 14-15. Once again Hosea's word pictures, impossible to imitate, have left an indelible impression, while at the same time returning his hearers to the reality of the situation.

### **Now, where was I... ?**

This surely is the biggest problem of the extended illustration, if not handled with care: it may be *so* extended that it threatens to engulf and obscure the truth it was meant to serve. Illustrations can, as we know to our cost, be *too* good. It is all too easy for a congregation to be left thinking, 'Great illustration this morning — but what exactly was he trying to teach?' By all means let the preacher be 'carried away' beyond the original scope of his illustration, if God's Spirit so prompts him. But that must never be an excuse of the preacher to say (or at least imply): 'Now, where was I? Ah yes, back to the point I was trying to make'.

### **And, finally...!**

Two points of concluding application for preachers remain. Firstly, Hosea 'knew himself', and was true to himself, as he preached and wrote. The same must be true for us if our message is not to be seen as merely contrived or borrowed. For all the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers remained distinctively themselves; therefore I must learn from Hosea, but not ape him: **I must be fully myself when most taken up by God. Any other style will be simply artificial.**

Secondly, Hosea knew the condition of his hearers. While we must never pander to our congregations, **we must know where they are, and tailor our message (both in content and language) accordingly.** In Hosea's case, a desperate situation demanded desperate measures; more often for us, we shall need to sympathise when our people feel hurt, rebuke where they are slack, encourage to greater service those who are faithful, or 'gently lead those that are with young'. But are there no self-satisfied, complacent, religious people in our congregations? No people who know the jargon of the faith yet remain impervious to its truth? So if God ever calls us to use Hosea's 'shock-tactics', as well as learning in a more direct way from the principles by which he wrote and spoke, we may be sure that he will bless our ministry, and his word will not return to him void.

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