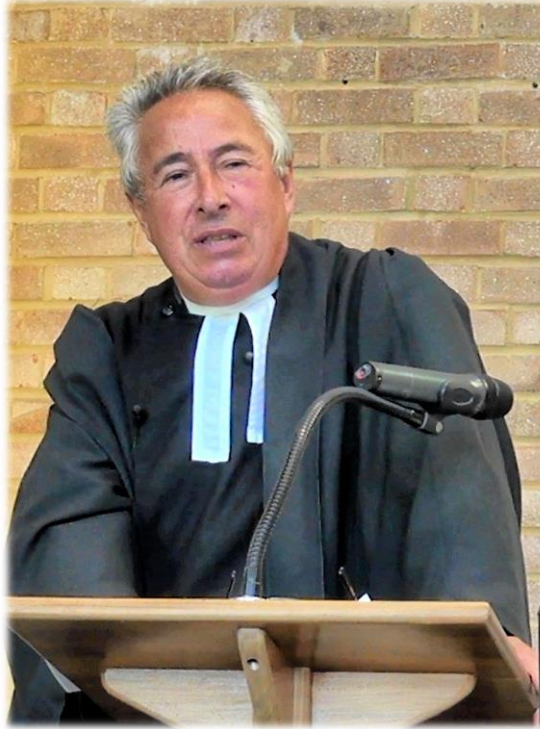


Morning Service Sunday 23rd August – led by Revd. Jonathan Hyde



Good to have Jonathan back with us after a multi-year break while he was Minister at Chingford URC. He loves looking at stars and thinks that God delights in stars and takes joy in creating stars and galaxies. Well, he certainly wouldn't have found any stars with us this Sunday. Anything that could go wrong did – no organ, no screen projection, a missing microphone and a wrong reading (your reviewer holds his hand up for the latter). Jonathan sailed through it all serenely as befits an ex-military chaplain.

The day's theme was God's Love, and we had three readings from the Scriptures and a commentary on each from Jonathan – *much of it unscripted and redolent of a military-style situation report!*

The first reading was from the book of Hosea, usually described as a minor prophet because only a smaller collection of his writings had come down to us. Hosea could be difficult to take in as his personal life had been complicated. Yet through his teaching, God had used Hosea's experience to speak powerfully about divine love. He was speaking around 726–722 BC, at a time when Israel was under threat, and within a century of Hosea's ministry, the Jewish people had been taken into Babylonian captivity. During that exile, what we now call the Old Testament had begun to be gathered and written down. Before then, the tradition had been passed on orally.

Hosea spoke about the love of God. The Scriptures used several words and images for love, but the love here was often understood as *agape*: a deep, faithful, self-giving love, like the love of a parent for a child, the love we have for those dearest to us, and the love we are called to have for God. And that was the theme of the reading: Hosea trying to help the people understand the steadfast love of God.

The passage presented Israel in a state of serious moral and spiritual decline. Many people had turned to the worship of Baal, a popular god in the ancient Middle East. But Baal worship involved practices that were profoundly contrary to what God desired, including sexual exploitation and child sacrifice.

Anyone who had cared deeply for children, family members, or even much-loved animals knew that love could be tested. There were moments of frustration but love still longed to welcome the other back. That was the assurance God gave through Hosea.

The people had gone astray and neglected God, yet God's message was still one of mercy and return:

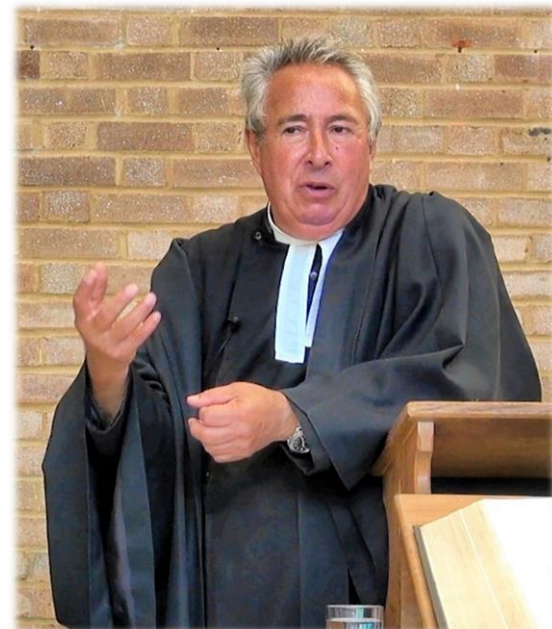
- They would face the consequences of their choices.
- They would be taken into captivity.
- But if they remained with God, God would not abandon them.

That message spoke to us as well. We also sinned, went astray, and sometimes distanced ourselves from God. Yet Hosea reminded us that God's love was patient, faithful, and always ready to draw us back.

The second reading was from Paul's first Letter to the Church in Corinth. Paul had visited Corinth earlier, had stayed there for some time, and helped build up the Christian community, though by this time he had been on his third missionary journey and was based in Ephesus. Corinth and Ephesus had been important centres of Greek culture and learning within the Roman Empire, but the church there was facing real tensions.

The Christian communities had been small, perhaps only a few dozen people in each gathering, and differences had begun to emerge between them. In the early church, this was understandable: they did not yet have the written Gospel accounts, and much of their faith was being shaped through teaching, letters, and personal witness. Some were attaching themselves to particular teachers or leaders, and divisions were forming. In response, the church wrote to Paul for guidance.

Paul's words were striking: "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." We might not always think of ourselves in that way, but every person who gathered for worship contributed to the life and witness of the church. Paul named different gifts and roles within the church, including



apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, healing, guidance, and other forms of service. His point was not to create a hierarchy of holiness, but to remind the church that each gift had its place.

Paul was addressing a very real challenge in the early church: the temptation to ask, “Who is the best Christian among us?” or “Who is more spiritual than everyone else?” Was a prophet more important than someone who performed miracles? Was speaking in tongues a sign of greater holiness? These were the kinds of questions and tensions the church was facing, and his answer was to point the church away from status and towards something far greater: love.

“I will show you the most excellent way”. “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” – the point being that religious activity could become empty noise if it was not rooted in love. However impressive our words, prayers, or gifts might appear, they lost their meaning when love was absent.

Prayer had to be meaningful. It needed sincerity, attention, and the right spirit behind it. This was not always easy. Many of us struggled with prayer at times. We might wonder whether our prayers were meaningful, whether we were truly concentrating, or simply repeating familiar words. There was comfort, though, in remembering that in the Lord’s Prayer, when we prayed “Our Father,” we were not praying alone. Christ had given us those words, and when we prayed, we prayed together with Him.

Our prayers changed as we moved through life. As children, we might pray about school, exams, worries, and immediate needs. Those particular concerns passed, and new ones took their place. We might find ourselves praying more for other people: for those who had shown an interest in God, for those we might no longer see, and for those whose circumstances we might not fully know. Even when we were unsure how effective our prayers were, we could still bring them before God in love. If our prayers were offered with genuine concern and commitment, then they were moving in the right direction.

The heart of Paul’s message was that love never failed. Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge would pass away, but love remained. This truth was especially powerful in times of bereavement, separation, and loss. Someone might die, or move far away, but love did not simply stop. We didn’t stop loving them, and their love for us was not erased by distance or death. That was because love belonged to the very nature of God. God was love and therefore love had a permanence and strength that nothing else could match.

When we accepted the truth that God was love, it became a deep source of assurance. Whatever happened to us, God was present, and His love remained. We might face heavy blows and difficult seasons, but we were never truly alone when God was with us.

To love God, we had to seek to know Him. Love grew through relationship, understanding, trust, and attention. That was the continuing challenge of faith: to know God more deeply so that we might love Him more fully. We might not fully understand the mind of God, but we could trust what Scripture revealed: God was love. His creativity, generosity, and greatness were beyond our limits, and we needed to be careful not to make Him smaller than He was. Some people placed narrow constraints on God, saying, “God would never do that.” But the truth was that we did not know the full mind of God. What we could say with confidence was this: God is love.

The third reading came from Mark. Many of us would have known difficult experiences at work or in other demanding settings: unpleasantness, anxiety, worry, or the strain of being in an environment where we didn’t feel at peace. Jesus understood that kind of pressure and knew what it was to suffer. He could truly say, “I have been there.” At some point—perhaps at his baptism—he’d come to understand the full weight of his mission: that he would suffer and die. He’d also known the frustrations of daily human relationships. His disciples had argued among themselves and struggled for position, while others tried to catch him out or condemn him because they’d disliked his teaching.

Jesus had been in the temple in Jerusalem. As often had happened, his teaching had disturbed some of the religious authorities, including the Pharisees and Sadducees. (The Sadducees were a small, elite group, not especially popular. They did not believe in the resurrection, so in their view death was simply the end. When the temple was destroyed their movement died out. The Pharisees had had a different outlook and continued as a movement for longer. Luke’s Gospel sometimes presented Pharisees in a less hostile light).

In Mark’s account, the man who’d approached Jesus had not seemed to be simply trying to trap him; he’d appeared genuinely interested in learning. He’d asked Jesus which commandment was the most important. Jesus had answered by quoting two passages from Scripture. First, he gave the great call of Israel’s worship: “*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*” Then He’d continued: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” These words came from Deuteronomy and were central to Jewish prayer and devotion.

Then Jesus had added the second commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” This had been the striking moment. The man would have known the command to love God, but Jesus joined it inseparably to love of neighbour. The man recognised the truth of Jesus’ answer. He agreed that loving God with all one’s heart, understanding, and strength - and loving one’s neighbour as oneself - were more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Jesus had seen that the man answered wisely and said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." That must have been a stunning moment for those listening. Jesus was saying that a life shaped by love of God and love of neighbour stood close to the heart of God's kingdom. After that, no one had dared ask him any more questions.

The answer had brought the whole matter into focus: faithful worship cannot be separated from practical love for others.

