

A LIVELY WORD

Hosea 4:2-3, 6:6, 7:8, 7:14, 8:14, 9:7, Colossians 4:6

If the Bible is a true word of God -- it is also a lively word. If the Holy Spirit animating the Bible is a Holy one, it is also a sprightly one. The Bible is not a dull theological disquisition -- a boring textbook for sapless scholars -- searching for universal principles. The Bible is essentially a story book -- packed with action -- and what a story! A real thriller. In the Old Testament you can (in a few months of reading) live a couple of thousand years with a God who tries (by every act He can think of) to entice a nomadic band of Semites into becoming a nation of the loved and loving people of God -- and you'd think the Almighty at least would be a success at it -- but no -- quite the opposite. Surprisingly -- God fails miserably and conspicuously. Then in the New Testament -- God tries again -- and in the ensuing encounter -- man sets his hand at killing God, which sounds very contemporary, and it all ends up by God saving man -- and whatever you think of all this -- you will never think -- "ho-hum -- this is a dull one". You may not call it a lovely story -- but it's a lively one and it's couched in lively language too -- not in the professor's impeccable speech -- not in the pious overtones of the priest either.

Biblical language doesn't smell of the classroom or the sanctuary -- but of the desert and the street. Thus the Old Testament tells it's tale in rough-hued, unembarrassed Bedouin speech -- full of bite -- and the New Testament is not in classical -- but in common trader, sailor, housewife Greek -- with many a metaphor -- to make the meaning jump at you off the page.

So the Bible is not so much a text for scholars as a book for adventurers -- if you want to be one. One thing sure, it's not for the soft -- or the finicky -- the easily shocked. If you want a parlor tale told in a prim and proper tongue -- then read something else -- but stay away from Holy Scripture. The Bible is trying to get people inside the story -- personally involved in the Gospel (God's spell, God's story) -- get them into the action -- as God's people -- fighting God's cause. Therefore plain and lively language must be employed -- as Paul explained, "In order that ye may know how to answer every man". Paul was a master of it and so was Jesus. That's the reason "the common people heard him gladly." Many of our theological dogmas are expanded metaphors derived from Paul. They both knew how to use salty speech to enlighten and enlist. One of the best examples of this in the Old Testament is the Prophet Hosea. He was a prophet full of wry humor. Now humor in a prophet is irritating -- especially to those in authority -- for it lets you see yourself in spite of yourself. So the elders of Israel, those straight laced old sinners -- without exception --

considered Hosea a young man with cheek -- and his prophecies such a piece of witty impertinence -- that lo and behold they preserved them -- for his saucy wit -- in spite of the fact that it stung them -- did enable them to see themselves as God saw them and if Hosea told them where to get off -- he also told them how to get on again -- for it tells a salty story in the people's tongue.

And all of this gets us around to what I intended to talk about today -- namely, slang in the Bible. If God is going to get himself across in lively action to live people, he must do so in speech the people will perk up and listen to and recall.

This is what Paul meant when he advised the Colossians, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt". Abstract, academic -- academy speech -- may warm the cockles of a few scholar's brains -- but for the great mass of people -- it is not highly enough seasoned, not salty enough -- to whet the imagination, much less win the heart -- enlist the loyalty.

Three examples of Hosea's profoundly spiritual slang expressions, wry humor, which helped to stab the people awake (three out of dozens in this little book) are as follows: Ephraim -- said Hosea is a "cake not turned" -- this is to say a flap-jack someone forgot to flip -- done on only one side, half baked. When you get it on your plate -- it looks toasted to a tea -- a lovely appetizing brown on top, where you can see it -- but underneath -- yuck -- still not baked -- not done through -- and who can stomach that? Not God, says the prophet. For who can eat the top half of a flap-jack? You have to take both sides together. Might as well not be baked at all, as half-baked.

And God saw Israel as half-baked -- so was fast losing His appetite for them. It was impossible for Him to make any constructive use of "a cake not turned". The fourteen chapters are filled with illustrations of their half-baked state. For instance the top layer of their society was done to a fine turn -- humm -- "lovely -- lovely" -- but underneath the rawest injustice, discrimination and poverty. It made God sick -- their half-baked society -- where a few stuffed off the many who starved.

The same way on the top side -- their religion looked well done too -- architecturally pleasing, aesthetically pleasing, liturgically pure -- all perfectly proper -- but it was a house of God without heart -- "They have lied to me" -- says the Almighty -- "They never put their heart into their prayers". All the religious trappings, yes, done to a fair the well, yes

-- but at the bottom on the flip side -- untouched by the fire of God -- the rawest kind of immorality -- "no fidelity, no kindness", said Hosea, "no knowledge of God in the land, nothing but perjury, lying, and murder, stealing, debauchery, burglary -- bloodshed on bloodshed!" "It's love, I desire, not sacrifice, knowledge of God, not only offerings." Their half-baked religion that's all in the temple and not in the home or street -- it makes the Almighty sick. One throws away a pancake done only on one side -- so God will destroy Israel. And if her religion was half-baked, so was her politics -- truckling to her rulers in outward show of loyalty to the state, while all the time plotting intrigue and overthrow of the government -- following a policy of expediency and appeasement in foreign relations "Ephraim is like a silly, senseless dove, crying to Egypt, flying to Assyria" -- trying to buy off trouble, first here, then there, changing sides with every changing tide of international fortune, no steady foreign policy in the name of God -- plain opportunism.

This half-baked politics -- like a half-baked cake -- the Almighty couldn't take. As with a half-baked people -- so with a half-baked person. And it doesn't help to have the cook point out that a pancake is properly done on one side, if it's not done through -- it's not done. So it doesn't help to say that a person is moral in places, good in spots -- like "he may cheat everyone in town -- but remember, he's generous and kind to his family". You can't serve a partly bad egg. You recall the hostess who served G. K. Chesterton a bad egg and noticing the guest didn't eat it, inquired, "Isn't it good?" To which he replied tactfully, but firmly -- "Madam, this egg has many good features -- but....." still and withal --

Well -- "half-baked" was a metaphor that made the people mad -- as it makes us -- for it more than implies we're in need of a deal more roasting.

And this brings us to the second metaphor, which didn't do much for improving prophet - people relations either. But the spirit of God was in this bite of wry humor also. This one was "full of hot air". It was directed against the government and the priests -- the professional ruler and the professional religionist. We use it of people whose words exceed their wisdom or action. As Chesterton once said of Tennyson, "He could not think up to the height of his own towering style"!

The way Hosea put it was -- "Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind". Now the east wind was straight off the desert, hot, impressive, but not productive. It burned up the crops. It was the milder west wind, off the sea, cool, laden with moisture -- that did the good. So, the nation, especially the princes, the priests -- were like east wind,

made hot, noisy speeches to the nations and the congregations -- but they were not productive, did no real good, all talk, just full of hot air that only did harm -- for it made everybody feel full and satisfied when they were far from it. There's something about a speech -- especially a good speech -- that's dynamic. One thinks of all our modern media of communication -- shelling us with propaganda -- pouring billions of words out of presses and sound tracks, over cables, through the air, bouncing our sounds off satellites and moons -- but with so little constructive to say -- sounds to distract, amuse, instruct -- but so often sound without soul -- promoting faction, discord, cold and hot war.

“Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followest after the east wind” (full of hot air). That wry humor is still a piece of impertinence to those who take their “much speaking” or “much listening” as substitute for much living in love.

And the third example -- of Hosea's wry wit is the ancient prototype of our -- “grow up!” -- “act your age!” Hosea put it -- “Gray hairs are here and there upon Ephraim and he knoweth it not.” The Nation of Israel thought it was still young -- that it had all the time in the world -- that it could bumble -- play around -- still be irresponsible like a child -- while in reality it was growing old -- playing the fool -- forgetting its mature duty to God and man. Like a seventeen year old living like a seven year old, thinking all doors open -- does not hear them silently shutting -- nothing more pathetic than a middle aged fool -- sporting the symbols of a younger generation. Silly, irresponsible, still gallivanting -- while all the time “gray hairs here and there and he knoweth it not.”

“Grow up” says the prophet -- “settle down -- be your age -- do an adult's work -- you're no kid any more -- take over before it's too late -- your time is running out.”

We Americans keep calling ourselves a “young” nation -- and we're not. We are aging with all the burdens and problems and perplexities of middle life. It's not 1776 any more -- it's 1971 -- and well, we better be our own sober age -- and do our job well -- we can't survive any longer on youth and growth and glitter. “Live by the wisdom of your gray hairs -- you are no longer a child.”

Well, truth is not always beautiful -- to those who profit by lies. The people raised a clamor against Hosea. His wit made them see red -- they called him something worse than a communist. They said instead, “This prophet is a crazy fool, a man inspired is a man insane!” And by this neat illogic -- justified themselves -- and went down in flames. But as

they went down in defeat -- some of them must have remembered that great figure of God -- Hosea painted for them. God in the figure of a loving husband -- with outstretched arms -- ready to receive and restore -- his unfaithful wife -- if only she would return to him. Some of them must have remembered and returned themselves unto this God who brought their fathers out of Egypt -- for did they not preserve the true and lively word of Hosea -- who did his very best to bring them back to some sober sense under the will of God?