

Spiritual Rebuilding VII

Haggai 2.1–9

St P's 09

For several weeks we've been looking at how the people of the Old Testament church suffered their long exile and how they were given a second chance to do God's work. We took a break from that last week— thanks to the YAC class and to Joe for his support of their ministry. The worst thing about being away was missing that. But today I want to come back to those returning exiles and the work God called them to, because I think there is something in their situation that can help us in ours.

It's a couple of weeks ago now, but you may remember how we saw in chapter 5 of Ezra that *Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, Who was over them*, and how the prophet Haggai told us that the people had been intimidated by those who did not approve of their plans to rebuild God's church, and called on the people to get back to the work God had called them to do. Today we heard some more of what God said through Haggai to the church of that time, and I want to think a bit about that this morning, so take a look at the passage printed in

the leaflet, 2.1–9, or in the pew Bible p 668 if you want to make sure we're not taking it out of context.

Notice the date, first—one of the most interesting things about the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets associated with them is how often they give dates, so we can often know exactly what event a prophet is talking about, which is not always the case with the other prophets. This prophecy comes *On the twenty-first day of the seventh month*, which is about a month after the new attempt to rebuild the Temple had started. We know this because as you'll see if you're following this in the Bible, the verse before this at the end of chapter 1 of Haggai says, *the whole remnant of the people... came and began to work on the house of the LORD... on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius*. And we read in Ezra a couple of weeks ago about how all the people came together on that date to start laying bricks on those foundations that had sat their fifteen years. And the date in our reading shows that just about a month later, God says to Haggai, *“Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 3 ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’”* This is not the easiest comment to understand, but it sounds like there is a bit of discouragement already, even after a month. Perhaps

it was already obvious that the new Temple would not be as beautiful as the old one, perhaps it was something else, but it sounds like some discouragement. This seems to be confirmed by what God then says through Haggai to Zerubbabel and Joshua:

“4 But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,” declares the Lord. “Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the Lord, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the Lord Almighty. 5 “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” Don’t be afraid, keep working, I’m with you.

The people hadn’t quite got over their fear yet. They were still tempted to go at a snail’s pace, perhaps even not do anything at all. After all, they had started work again after that fifteen year pause, and Haggai had said some nice things about how God would take care of them, perhaps now they were tempted to say ‘God’s got it under control, He’ll bring things along in His own good time.’ So God has to remind them, *Be strong, all you people of the land, and work... This is what I covenanted with you... My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’*

I think that’s a word for many in God’s church today. I’m even going to stick my neck out and say that’s a word for St Peter’s. Some of us are concerned because

we are a church that does not quite know how it is going to meet all its expenses next year. We didn't meet them all this year, and had to dip into our savings, which we call our Mission Endowment, but if we keep on doing that, it's eventually going to disappear, and we will not be able to survive. If we use our savings at the rate we have this year, it will all be gone in ten or twelve years. I think our current financial position is not a disaster in itself, but it is a wake-up call from God. If we don't treat it as a wake up call, it will become a disaster, but if we do treat it as a wake-up call, our financial problem will turn out to have been a wonderful thing. We all know how to deal with a wake-up call; we sit up, rub our eyes a bit, remember what we were woken up for, and get out of bed and get on with it. God's word through the prophet Haggai tells us why we are being woken up: *Be strong, all you people of the land, and work... This is what I covenanted with you.* Be strong and do the work of the church, which is to bring people to faith in Christ and help them to grow in faith in Christ. That's our purpose, and everything we do must serve that purpose. We're being called by God to remember our purpose, His purpose for us. Perhaps we've wandered from that a bit. Does everything we do as a parish serve that purpose first and foremost? Perhaps it's time to stop and ask that about the things we are doing. Perhaps when we are considering a new programme or policy, we need to ask, 'will it help us bring people to faith in

Christ?’ and ‘will it help our members grow in faith in Christ?’ If we can’t answer yes to one of those questions, perhaps we should drop the idea. If we can answer yes, we need to begin doing it, even if it looks difficult, or costs money that we think we need for other things, or disturbs the *status quo* in some way. *My Spirit remains among you*, God says. *Do not fear*. Just do the work of the church. Remember your purpose and stick to it.

If we are in the position of the Old Testament church, so that Haggai’s words are for us too, we’ll find the next few verses especially interesting. For God has a deeper purpose for the returning exiles than the mere building of a Temple; that Temple will advance the cause of something much bigger than its builders can know. Look at v 6: *This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. 8 ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty. 9 ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.’*

God tells those exiles, and perhaps us too, that He is on the verge of doing something that will shake things up. Something much bigger than a new house of worship is

coming. God is preparing the returned exiles for the coming of the Messiah. Did that phrase *the desired of all nations will come* ring any bells in your mind? We sing those words every year as we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Messiah:

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

The *desired of all nations* is the Messiah, the promised Saviour, the one who will save his people from their sins. He is the Christ, the one in whose faith God calls us to grow. And that's not just a nice poetic touch; we can see today that Jesus truly is the desired of all nations. It's very hard to find someone of any religion or even none, anywhere in the world, who has a bad word to say about Jesus. They may have terrible things to say about the church, or about the Christians they know, but when they read about the things Jesus said and did, they want to be part of it. That's why so many different religions have found a way to call Jesus a prophet, or a guru, or an avatar or any of the other titles they use for someone of great spiritual power. Even if they don't recognise Him as God become Man, the Word made Flesh, they still know He is someone special and they desire to be on His side. That's why

when it comes to sharing our faith, it's really hard to go wrong when you talk about Jesus. It's far easier to talk about Him than it is to talk about Christianity, and people are far more likely to listen, especially if you're just sharing what you know rather than telling someone what they must believe. He truly is the desired of all nations.

It is from the time of the exile that the Jews really began to understand that God was going to send them a Messiah. Many of the prophecies about Jesus that we read during Advent and Christmas come from the list of prophets at the end of the leaflet, prophets who were active during the exile or the return. *You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel*—that's another one.

God began to prepare people for the coming of Christ through the work they did rebuilding of the Temple. It wasn't just so that the returning exiles had a nice place to go when they offered their sacrifices, it was a foreshadowing of the one last sacrifice that would make sacrifice unnecessary for ever, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. God was doing more than they knew as He helped them rebuild, and they were contributing to more than they knew when they did the work He gave them to do.

If we at St Peter's are trying to rebuild our church, and Haggai's words are for us too, then God may have much bigger things in mind for us than we can know about today. But God doesn't ask us to understand all that He is doing, He just asks us to do the work of bringing people to faith in Christ and helping them grow deeper in that faith. When we do that, His plans for all mankind are being brought to their completion, even if we don't understand how, and we will be blessed with all that we need for that work.

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