

## Evensong, Third Sunday of Easter, All Saints Rothbury 2008

Haggai is one of those books I can never find and have to look up in the index. It's not really read much. So who was he? He was a prophet who spoke to the little Jewish community which had settled again in the Promised Land after the Babylonian Captivity. The only thing we really know about him is that he was a priest.

Haggai's writing is unusual because each message is carefully dated. We can place his preaching of each sermon recorded in this book to the day! Much more remarkable is this: the people acted on his exhortation! While many Old Testament prophets (nor modern 21<sup>st</sup> century preachers) saw no real response to their ministries, Haggai saw the Jews actually act on his preaching. This book, whose theme is putting God first, has a special message for us as well as for the men and women of Haggai's day.

The first part of our reading is dated August 29, 520 B.C. and then the second part is dated October 17, 520 B.C.

If you want general historical perspective of the return of the Jews from the Exile, have a read of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Prophet Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai too. They all mention many of the same people, such as Zerubbabel (who was governor of the Jewish community) and Joshua (who was high priest). But it was Haggai who, stirred up by the spirit of God, called people to restore the broken and desecrated temple. And we read that the people, this small advance party of Jews, actually started work.

I am sure that there were many site meetings, just as there would be today, although Hard Hats were still a thing of the future. There would have been all sorts of discussions between the end of August and the third week of September, 520 B.C. Perhaps the feasibility and costings were examined in detail by a small sub-committee. Or is that just an Anglican talking? But in a remarkably short period of time Zerubbabel and Joshua set restoration work on the House of God in hand.

I am sure there were many eeyores to overcome - it will cost too much, it will

be too difficult, we're too old to start again. All of that. No progress is ever made without having to overcome the resistance of the doom merchants. The fact that construction was started at all was a reflection on the firm and far sighted civic and religious leadership in Jerusalem. Unless Zerubbabel and Joshua had given the project their support, it would probably never have got off the ground. But, against all odds, work began on the temple on September 21, 520 B.C.

This is really amazing. Think of the sheer size of Haggai's proposal. Solomon's temple had taken seven years to build and had been supported by heavy taxation and forced labour. Haggai proposed rebuilding the temple by what amounted to voluntary labour. Yet the people volunteered in a spirit of obedience of God. So far as we can tell there would be no reward for their work. They simply believed that Haggai was telling them the truth - that God, their God, wanted them to do it.

The community was no doubt inspired in part by their leaders. The Lord "stirred up the spirit" (verse 14) of Zerubbabel and of Joshua, and through them the spirit of all the people. The language of "stirring the spirit" implies the restoration of vision and the renewal of energy. God had stirred up the people and there had been a complete change of heart in the community. Sluggishness had been replaced by the desire to work; despondency had been converted into enthusiasm. As a former soldier I *would* say this, but the role of the leaders must not be underestimated.

What Haggai had achieved, in human terms, was the transference of his own vision and enthusiasm from God to the community's leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua. Unlike the prophet, these men were able to convert vision into action through the authority of their offices. Haggai was engaged in what would be called nowadays "political action", and his engagement in turn had moved him into the leadership role among his people.

Many people hold positions of leadership, though sadly they do not always bring vision and enthusiasm to their roles. Some just do not have the capacity or ability to transform the lethargy of others into constructive action. Without disparaging the gifts of the governor and the high priest, it was the

contribution of the prophet that was the more instrumental in bringing the fresh air of constructive change to Jerusalem.

In the middle of tale of action and planning, the prophet once again declares a divine oracle. This time, it is short and to the point: "I am with you, says the Lord". This is different from the prophet's first divine word. There, Haggai had pointed out that the troubles in the land could largely be attributed to the divine absence. But now that the God's work was the first priority, now that work was about to start, the prophet could bring tell his people that God was with them, encouraging and undergirding their efforts. What a grand message to receive.

Haggai's proclamation of the word of divine encouragement is echoed in future scriptures and into our present world. In Jesus' final and great commission to his disciples, his final words to them were: "I am with you always, to the close of the age." Just as Haggai declared God's words of encouragement and affirmation to those who were about to rebuild God's House, so too Jesus declared them to those who were about to build his Church. Indeed, to all who are engaged in the furtherance of the Kingdom of God, the promise of divine presence is repeated.

When we get a bit further into our Old Testament reading, almost a month has passed since the work on the temple began. The timing is significant. The 21st day of the 7th month (viz. October 17, according to our modern calendar) was the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles. It was a public holiday, and people from the countryside would join the crowds from the city in the festivities of the day. I am sure many of the folk there would have gone over to the temple precincts to see how the work was progressing. After all the fuss about getting going again, there wasn't much to see. Only a month had passed since the work started, and the work in that one month had been disrupted, not only by the Festival of Tabernacles but also by the celebration of Yom Kippur which preceded the Festival of Tabernacles.

People immediately went into eeyore mode again. Look what they are doing here! This will be a half-baked building compared with the old temple that Solomon built! Perhaps there were a few octogenarians present who had

actually been familiar with the original temple before its destruction. Wistful recollections of the splendour of the past would have added to the frustration in their younger audience.

There original opponents of the building project must have loved this. Better not to have started than to have produced this jerry-built structure! So Haggai once again addresses the governor, the high priest, and the assembled crowds. He note the rumblings and discontent, but converts them to positive words of encouragement in his speech.

Despite all criticisms, they are to take courage and get on with the job, for God is with them (verse 4). He utters some pretty opaque references to an earthquake too, but the general thrust of the oracle is clear: the temple now under construction would one day be more splendid that its predecessor. This might even be so because one day the Hebrews would once again have a wealthy empire as they did in the days of David and Solomon, drawing upon the wealth of other nations.

The immediate task at hand was the restoration of the temple; Haggai may well have realised that it would not match Solomon's for splendour. The times had changed, and they must do what they could. But the prophet saw also a more distant age in a new world; he envisaged a future with its restored land and splendid temple.

The future, though, was always contingent upon the present; there could be no glorious future temple, if the present temple continued to lie in ruins. You see, the ruined temple had come to symbolize a ruined people. Only when the people were restored to faith would a restoration on a larger, world-wide scale become a possibility. And Haggai could visualise, albeit dimly, that in the ultimate splendour of the temple, the Gentiles would have a role to play.

There is a correlation between the situation which faced Haggai and that which constantly faces the Christian Church. The prophet had before him the task of building a temple; the Church has before it the task of building the Kingdom of God. But now, as then, there are many within the Church who are overcome by negative thinking, who can see only problems and no

possibilities. "Look how long the Christian Church has been struggling at this business of the Kingdom of God, and where is it today? Frankly, the world does not seem to be a much better place than it was 2,000 years ago; if anything, it is worse. Surely it is a waste of time to sweat and struggle with the Kingdom of God?"

The trouble with negative thinkers of course, is they usually have a modicum of truth in their arguments. If we are honest, not much progress has been made with the Kingdom over two millennia. And even the readers of Norman Vincent Peale (the Power of Positive Thinking) would have to admit that our prospects for the future are not too bright.

To counter such thinking, we need to remember Haggai's double focus. It may be true that we will not build such a splendid structure. But unless we set about the task, the doom laden prophecies will come true. It is only as we engage in the **task** of building the Kingdom that we leave open the door for a more marvellous work of God. This is not always self-evident; it requires an act of faith.

Nevertheless, we can sense the truth in part. Over many centuries, people have searched for peace and the abolition of war - part of the will of God for his world. They have not succeeded, though they have perhaps improved the world a little. But if they had abandoned the pursuit of peace, many centuries ago, then even the hope and ideal of peace might have been lost to civilization. Likewise, the Church must continue to seek that peace of God for all the world, for if it is lost, there remains no hope

This isn't just the 'someone else' responsibility. It is personal. It is yours and mine. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. But the growth of the temple - within ourselves, and collectively as we build the church, is you responsibility, and it is mine.