

I Am with You

A Sermon on Haggai 1:1-15a

On 12 October, 539 BC, Cyrus, King of Persia, took possession of the great city of Babylon. The Greek historian Herodotus records that Cyrus captured the city with such rapidity that the Babylonian king's son and regent, Belshazzar, was unaware that the city had fallen, and continued eating and dancing with his subjects until Cyrus' troops had made their way into the palace itself. Cyrus himself claimed that he and his troops entered the city without fighting. On the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, now housed in the British Museum, Cyrus claimed that when he entered the city 'all the people of Babylon ... bowed down to him, kissed his feet, and rejoiced at his rule, filled with delight.'

For the Judean exiles living in Babylon, the fall of Nebuchadnezzar's empire to Cyrus was overwhelmingly perceived as good news. While the Babylonians themselves had managed to avoid having their city ransacked and razed to the ground, disappointing Jewish hopes for retribution for the loss of their own city in 586, such disappointment was more than compensated for by what Cyrus did next: he allowed the exiles to go home.

Cyrus tasked the returning exiles with rebuilding the Temple that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed after the fall of Jerusalem over 40 years earlier. That the Persians should care about the restoration of the temple of an unknown God in a far-flung outpost of their new empire would seem fantastic, were it not for the evidence of the Cyrus Cylinder, in which Cyrus portrays himself as a devout worshipper of the Babylonian god Marduk, and arranges for the return of cult statues of Marduk to shrines in various cities of Mesopotamia. The Cylinder therefore encourages modern historians to see in the edict of Ezra not a profession of Cyrus' own personal religious convictions (the Persian Cyrus was no more likely to have been a worshipper of YHWH than he was of the Babylonian Marduk), but rather an expression of a wider policy of conciliating local elites and co-opting them into the administration of Cyrus' vast new empire.

Very different is the situation at the outset of the book of Haggai. All the oracles in the book are dated to 'the second year of King Darius,' that is, 520 BC. The returnees have been back in Jerusalem for nearly twenty years, and yet, as the prophet points out in v. 2, the Temple still lies in ruins. What had gone wrong? Putting together the evidence of the first half of the Book of Ezra, what seems to have happened is this:—

The first wave of returnees soon found themselves embroiled in a dispute about just who constituted the true people of God. Who had the right to build a new temple over the ruins of the old, and who would have the right to offer sacrifices there? When the Babylonians had led the nation away into exile, they had left behind the poorest in the land to till the fields. Would the descendants of the slaves of a family returning from exile in Babylon have felt constrained to turn over the land they had been cultivating to the descendants of their former masters? And what about the worshippers of YHWH descended from people settled in Samaria by the Assyrians after they had destroyed the Northern Kingdom in the late eighth century?

It seems from the Book of Ezra that while returning exiles and the poor of the land managed to achieve a fragile unity under the leadership of the former group, for whatever reason it was not felt possible to extend that community to those worshippers of YHWH who were not of demonstrable Jewish descent. Having been barred from participation in rebuilding the temple, a number of influential men belonging to this third group were then able to intimidate the Jewish community in Jerusalem into a state of inactivity by bribing Persian officials and denouncing the Jerusalem party to Persian authorities as would-be rebels. Work on the temple was abandoned, and the restoration project slumbered under a weight of administrative red tape.

Into this situation entered the prophet Haggai, with a message from the LORD for the temporal and spiritual leadership of the community gathered in and around Jerusalem:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, “The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.””

Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it a time for you to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’

Haggai’s oracle turns on two words: ‘time’ and ‘house’. God’s people have been saying that, however desirable it may be to have a functioning Temple, present realities mean that such a project will simply have to wait. God responds: Is it fitting – is it an appropriate ‘time’ – for God’s temple – ‘this house’, **הבית הזה** – to lie in ruins while the people themselves live in houses with coffered ceilings and panelled walls?

To this argument about action appropriate for the present moment God adds another. Have the people not noticed that whatever they turn their hands to seems to come to nothing?

‘You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, but only to put them in a purse with holes in it.’

If this sounds vaguely familiar to you, it may be because this is the sort of thing that God threatened the Israelites with should they violate the terms of the covenant they have made with him back in Deuteronomy 28. God tells the returnees that he has struck the land with what is sometimes known as a futility curse. This is not quite as grim as it sounds, because at any rate it seems to presuppose that God and the returning Judeans still stand in a covenant relationship to one another, something that had been open to question once the nation had ceased to exist and the Temple been destroyed in 586. Neither is the picture of a people wasting away under a futility curse while living in finely crafted houses quite as odd as it might at first seem: in Antiquity one bad harvest is all that stands between a population and hunger.

For Haggai’s audience there would also have been a certain fittingness between crime and punishment: the returnees have been content to leave the Temple in ruins (חרב); the Lord seeks to rouse them to action by inflicting on the land a drought (חרב): in Hebrew, both words derive from the same Hebrew verb, חרב, ‘to be desolate’.

But at the same time as he makes known to them that their present suffering is a direct result of his displeasure God gives the Israelites a way out of their difficulties: ‘Go up into the mountains,’ he tells them in v. 8, ‘and bring down timber and build my house.’ To appreciate what God is asking the Judeans to do, we have to ask: What is a temple? And what was the significance of the Temple in Jerusalem for the Israelites more specifically?

In the Ancient Near East, a temple was a place where heaven met earth. The god to whom the temple was dedicated was thought to indwell the building in a heightened sense, and this was generally achieved by placing a cult statue of the god within the temple as a focus for the worship of the god. Sacrifices would be offered, seeking the god’s favour; sometimes people might sleep at the temple, hoping to receive a dream from the god. People might come to the temple hoping that the god would heal them of a disease or illness.

For Israel, too, the Jerusalem Temple was a place where God had chosen to be present in a heightened form. In contrast to the surrounding nations, no cult statue was to be found in the temple, but there was a Holy of Holies, in which was placed the Ark, the stone tablets of the Law, overshadowing which were representations of cherubim. The Temple was a place where

Israelites could go to enjoy fellowship with God, to offer sacrifice for sins they had committed against him, and to receive instruction in God's Law.

This is what has been missing from the life of those now gathered in and around Jerusalem.

This is not to say that all features of Israel's spiritual life had been entirely suspended: it seems from the evidence of Ezra that a provisional altar of some sort had been erected within the Temple ruins and that sacrifices were being offered there, but it's certain that whatever was occurring on the Temple mount, it remained fundamentally makeshift in nature in contrast to the increasingly settled character of the returnees' everyday lives. And here it's worth asking: does the life you live before God have a provisional character that stands in contrast to a relatively settled everyday life? Does the way you engage with God's word, for example, be it with others or on your own, happen in a makeshift way, or is it embedded into the daily rhythms of your life? Is your giving sporadic and haphazard, or is it planned and deliberate? File that question away, and we'll return to it later in the sermon.

I've said earlier that Haggai is a collection of oracles, or prophecies, but that probably fails to do justice to the importance of the editorial narrative in which they've been embedded. Part of this has to do with the meticulous way in which the individual oracles have been dated, and their addressees specified. But it also has to do with the editor's interest in how those oracles were received. Verses 12 to 15 are the most extensive example of this feature of the book.

Here the first thing to note is the way that Haggai's first oracle meets with an extraordinary fate. That is – in sharp contrast to almost all surviving prophecy in the Bible – people do what it says. The people '*obeyed* the voice of the LORD their God.' So unusual is the reception of the prophet's speech that it's worth breaking down into its component parts.

In the first place, the people are able to recognise in Haggai's message the voice of the LORD. The years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem had been characterised by the clashing messages of different prophets, all claiming to represent God. The prophets of salvation were proved to be false prophets when the city fell to the Babylonians. The prophets of doom – Jeremiah foremost among them – were proved to be right. The voice behind Haggai's words stands in continuity with the prophets of doom, and it causes God's people *to fear*. Even though this lies somewhat beyond what is actually said in this passage, this capacity to discern God's word in the words of the Bible, and the existential, even visceral reaction that it engenders is in Christian theology part of the doctrine of illumination, a doctrine traditionally appropriated to the Holy Spirit. That is, it's part of the work of the Holy Spirit to enable Christians to hear Scripture as God's word, and for that hearing of God's word to provoke some sort of response within us.

God's work in enabling and empowering a faithful human response to his words becomes explicit only from v. 13 of the little narrative we have before us. Here, the prophet, confronted by a receptive and unsettled audience, is authorised by the LORD to follow up with a second oracle: 'I am with you.' And, then, having first unsettled, and then reassured, his hearers, God 'stirs up the spirit of Zerubbabel and the spirit of Joshua ... and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people' in such a way that they find themselves empowered to begin work on the Temple afresh.

Here we see two more aspects of the Spirit's work within his people. In the first place, and more as an aside, the Spirit is able to weld a fragile coalition of potentially clashing interests into a genuine communion of joint action. The Spirit brings unity to God's people as he unites them around his Word, and as his presence makes itself known in their midst: He is 'with us', as it says in v. 13. Secondly, and again, in Christian theology, acting by means of his Spirit, the LORD 'stirs up the spirit' of his people, so that they are able to do the LORD's will. The theological shorthand for this ongoing work of God within his people is 'sanctification'.

This theme of being empowered to do God's will is an important one in Haggai, but as it reappears in the next chapter I'm going to hold off applying it to us at St George's for now and focus instead in our remaining time on the theme of discerning what action is most appropriate for the present moment, the theme Haggai raises in vv. 2 and 3.

I presume that everyone living in Jerusalem during the early Persian period would have agreed that rebuilding the Temple was important work and needed to be done. Nonetheless, nearly twenty years had gone by since the return of the first group of exiles, and still there was no Temple. True, the hostility of neighbouring people hadn't gone away, but what Haggai was able to pinpoint was the absurdity of Judeans living in well-appointed houses while the House of God remained a ruin, when rebuilding the Temple had, according to the Book of Ezra at any rate, been the main reason for making the dangerous journey back to Jerusalem in the first place.

Working out what needs to be done in what order has never been a strength of mine. It will be 8:10 on a school day, and rather than wrestling Jeremy into his school uniform I can be relied upon to be taking out the rubbish and putting dirty clothes in the wash instead. Why bash out that first draft, when I could be fiddling with my bibliography? Why clean out the gutters when I could be weeding? Why write that Bible study when I could go for a run? Why go for a run when I could be on Instagram?!

But there comes a time when the discrepancy between what we say is most important in our lives and the actual way that we use our time becomes ... ridiculous. We might say that we think the Bible is the Word of God, but if the only time we find to engage with that Word is on a Sunday morning, how central is that Word to our lives, really? We might say that we believe God cares deeply for all people and yearns for them to become a part of his people, but if all our conversations after church wind up being with people we already know well, how closely is our heart mirroring God's? We might say that being a Christian means taking up one's cross, and that a life of sacrificial service is the best life, but what do we really believe when we find ourselves looking for fulfilment in mindless consumption?

All of us, twenty years or so into our new lives in Christ, are liable to find that some things that belong to the centre have migrated to the periphery, while other things that are peripheral have worked their way to the centre. Knowing when is the time to do what is not always easy. But the time for God to be at the centre of our lives is always *now*. Let's pray:—

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for your word to us through the prophet Haggai. Please help us to know how best to serve you today and tomorrow. Thank you for giving us your Spirit to empower us to work for you. Please grow in us an awareness of those aspects of our lives that fail to honour you as they should, and please stir up our spirits to carry out your will in everything that we do.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.