

# I Will Fill This House with Glory

*A Sermon on Haggai 1:15b-2:9*

Towards the very end of the Old Testament lies a small collection of oracles all dating to the year 520 BC. They are written for a band of men and women gathered in and around Jerusalem, in the early years of the Persian Era. The membership of this community was a fragile mix of Old Judeans, those who had escaped deportation under the Babylonians, and returning exiles, men and women who had availed themselves of an edict of the Persian King Cyrus, issued after the conquest of Babylon, allowing the displaced people of his new empire to return to their homes and reestablish their religious life under the protection of the new *pax persiana*.

These people had been busy trying to rebuild their lives, even as they sought to shoulder an additional burden of scarcity and soaring prices as the land was gripped by drought. In their midst lay the ruins of Solomon's Temple, destroyed by the Babylonians nearly seventy years earlier. And last week we saw how in the first of these oracles God used Haggai to galvanise this community into starting work on a second temple, a place in which God might be honoured and in which he might take pleasure.

The second of Haggai's oracles, the one we've just had read to us, is dated to 17 October, 520 BC. Four weeks have passed since the resumption of work on the temple, but enthusiasm for the project is faltering as a result of a pessimistic assessment of what the new temple, when completed, will be like.

The ambivalence many people felt when comparing the humble beginnings of this new project with the vanished splendour of the first was captured powerfully by the author of the Book of Ezra, who tells us that

when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, ... all the people gave a great shout ... But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping.

Interestingly, archaeologists believe that if anything the temple built by Zerubbabel was slightly larger than Solomon's, but, of course, a building as it appears to a ten year old, and it's hard to imagine the oldest in the community as being much older than that at the time the first temple

was destroyed, would naturally appear to be much larger than a similar structure would to an adult. But it's certainly true that Zerubbabel's temple was constructed in a time of financial hardship, whereas Solomon's had been built in an age of unmatched prosperity. And it's unlikely that nostalgia was the only thing responsible for generating the disappointment felt so keenly by the oldest members of the community.

However—that feeling of nostalgia is worth pausing over and interrogating for a moment, if only because nostalgia can be a powerful driver of behaviour, in one's spiritual life as much as anywhere else. The danger confronting the temple builders in Haggai's day is that of romanticising the past in a way that makes for paralysis in the present. Reading this passage reminded me of the character of Amelia Osborne in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, whose idealised recollection of her dead husband, George, prevents her in her widowhood from accepting the love of Captain Dobbin. Actually, as readers, we know that George was a complete rotter, and we sense that, in order to break the spell cast by Amelia's nostalgic fidelity, and progress the plot of the novel, this idealised portrait of George will have to be broken and Amelia disillusioned.

And disillusionment is a strategy that would have been quite appropriate for Haggai to use here. 'Wait a minute!' he might have said. 'Just think back to what was *actually* going on in Solomon's Temple in the days before Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar! What about Jeremiah 7? People were placing their trust in the temple building rather than in the LORD! Or what about Ezekiel 8? People were worshipping all sort of things in that temple! The whole place was a disaster waiting to happen! You are idealising something that never existed and by doing so you're making it hard for people to see the very real thing that God is doing here among us today!'

He could have said any of those things. But what he actually says is:

'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?'

Haggai shows restraint and gentleness in dealing with the oldest members of his community. He is able to see the freshly begun work on the new temple from their perspective: it does look like nothing (תִּשָׁן). 'But,' says the Lord, 'I (אֲנִי) am with you.' Haggai plays on the similarity of the Hebrew words for 'nothing' and 'I' to introduce the great 'nevertheless' on which this whole passage turns. 'Yes, the work undertaken so far is underwhelming, but why give up when God himself has promised to be with us through his Spirit?'

All of us are at times struck by a disparity in the way God would have us describe aspects of our lives before him and the often humdrum nature of those same activities as we experience them

in our everyday lives. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has an elderly demon advise a junior colleague, Wormwood, who is responsible for tempting a young man who has, rather calamitously for Wormwood, just become a Christian. ‘Don’t panic,’ advises Screwtape.

Work hard ... on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman. The Enemy allows this disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavour. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by *Stories from the Odyssey* buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have got married and begin the real task of learning to live together. In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing.

You agree to help lead a Bible study. You imagine a group where thoughtful exploration of God’s Word leads seamlessly into sensitive application. Instead, you experience perplexity. You haven’t got a clue what that passage in Numbers means, so maybe it’s just as well that half the members of your group have been knocked out by that disgusting illness their kids brought back from daycare. Or you’ve begun leading in Kids’ Church. You imagined you’d be taking part in reaching a new generation with the good news about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Instead, you experience frustration when your lesson plan goes up in smoke, as your woeful sense of what activities will actually work for the kids in your class is mercilessly exposed.

‘What am I achieving here?’ you cry to yourself. ‘Nothing!’

‘But,’ God replies, ‘I am with you. My Spirit remains among you. Be strong and work.’

All the comfort in these first five verses of Haggai, chapter two, comes from the force of that divine ‘Nevertheless!’. God is perfectly well aware of the shortcomings of our first faltering steps in obedience before him. But he promises to be with us and to sustain us in them before him nevertheless. Notice that according to Haggai God will not be with the Judeans *only once* they have successfully rebuilt the temple. Putting the witness of these verses alongside the testimony of last week’s passage, we can say that God *is* with them as he stirs up their spirits and empowers them by his own Spirit to *start* work on the temple, and to *keep on* working in times of discouragement.

The last four verses of our passage today also deal with the problem of discouragement, but from another angle. All of us experience the need to see what we do as fitting into, and contributing to, a larger whole. When my wife, Anthea, began work as a doctor, she was shaken by a number of instances when a good deal of hospital resources and a whole lot of paperwork

would wind up doing not much good for the patients they were meant to be helping. As a result of this frustration, she began in her resident year a Master's degree in public health. This was not always understood by the people she worked under. 'Why would you do a Master's in public health?' asked one bemused specialist. Anthea was not enjoying the particular rotation she was doing in the hospital at the time, and so she was a trifle less diplomatic than she might have been. 'Because it makes what I do here seem less futile,' she replied.

This is the problem confronting the Judeans in vv. 5 to 9. Haggai is prophesying in the immediate aftermath of a period of international turmoil. Cyrus' son and heir, Cambyses, had, in the years immediately before Haggai's ministry, successfully subdued Egypt, only to die on his way back to Persia. The next year saw numerous revolts as many provinces in the still-young empire sought to throw off the Persian yoke. Darius himself, though a member of the Achaemenid royal family, was not in the direct line of succession, and his eventual kingship was established only after months of chaos.

And then—everything calmed down. Jerusalem and its surrounds went back to being a mostly quiet, insignificant, relatively poor part of a vast empire. What had become of Israel's hopes that their capital would become a site of pilgrimage for all the nations of the world, and that YHWH would be known and worshipped not only as the God of Israel but as the God of Heaven, as he is termed in the Aramaic correspondence in the Book of Ezra? What is the point of bearing witness to the ways of God with man when no one is interested in your testimony?

We all need to see how we fit into the big picture of where God is taking this world. The Israelites can see only what they lack and the indifference of the nations. 'But,' says the LORD—

In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and the treasures of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty.

God promises in these verses to bring on the world a convulsion compared to which the political upheaval of the years just gone will look like a ripple in a duck pond, a convulsion which will prise loose the wealth of the nations, wealth, which, once brought to Jerusalem, will ensure that the splendour of the new temple exceeds that of the old.

'Keep the end in view,' says the prophet to his people. 'In the minutiae and the smallness of your everyday striving don't forget where this all ends.' Christians gather together, mostly, in small congregations that look a lot like ours here at St George's. They are not glorious in any obvious sense of that word. The organ is out of tune. The slides stop halfway through the last

song. There's a hole in the roof from where some of the plaster fell down last week right over the spot where someone would normally be sitting. The sermon is so-so. But this is how God has chosen to build up the body of his Son, the Church. 'Do not despise the day of small things,' said Haggai's contemporary, the prophet Zechariah. Never forget that what you see week by week in your own small church, however unimpressive, is actually in God's kindness being caught up into the vast sweep of what God is doing among the entirety of his people throughout the world and throughout time. "I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty.'

Let's pray:—

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your words of encouragement to us this morning from the Book of Haggai.

Thank you that, when faced with disappointment in our service of you, we can know that you are with us nevertheless, and that your Spirit remains among us. Thank you that you promise to take the unimpressive things that we do for you and build them into something glorious.

Knowing this, Father, and in your strength, help us to be strong and work.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.