From This Day on I Will Bless You

A Sermon on Haggai 2:10-19

This week we return to the world of post-exilic Jerusalem in the third of four sermons from the Book of Haggai. It is 'the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius,' three months to the day from when work began on the new Temple. The LORD gives his prophet a word, and a task. The task comes first, and then the word.

God tells Haggai to go to the priests and ask for a תורה, which in this context means, not the first five books of the Bible, or one of the laws contained in those books, but an orally-delivered direction about what makes for correct cultic practice given a particular set of circumstances. Haggai presents the priests with two scenarios. In the first scenario, a man returns from the Temple carrying some of the meat cooked during a sacrifice he has made there. Now, sacrifices in Israel were of various kinds and were made for various purposes. Some sacrifices were burnt up in their entirety; the meat of other sacrifices was given to the priests; the meat from yet other sacrifices could also be eaten by laymen. The meat from some sacrifices could only be consumed in the temple precinct itself; the meat from other classes of sacrifice could be taken away and eaten in the home.

This is the context presupposed by Haggai's first scenario. A man carries away from a sacrifice some consecrated meat, which he stores in the skirt of his garment. What happens if the skirt then brushes against any of the food in his house? Does it become consecrated, too? The priests reply, 'No.' In chapters 29 and 30 of the book of Exodus, the altar and various utensils used in offering sacrifices could communicate the property of holiness to whatever they touched, but according to the direction given by Haggai's priests, this is not the case for consecrated meat brought back from the temple to be consumed in the home.

Haggai's second scenario is really the inverse of the first: What happens if someone who has been defiled through contact with a נפש, which in this context must mean a corpse, touches any of these things? Do they become defiled, as well? 'Yes, they do,' reply the priests. 'Things do not necessarily become holy by coming in contact with the holy, but whatever touches the defiled is automatically defiled,' seems to be the most obvious way of putting these two scenarios together.

Having forced the priests to commit themselves by giving him their תורה, Haggai now tightens the noose by delivering his own word from the LORD: "'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight," declares the LORD. "Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.'"

What has Haggai done here? He has enacted a scene, and then attached to this scene a word from the LORD. Haggai has performed what is technically known as a sign-act. The sign-act is a favourite teaching device of the prophets. Much as a modern preacher will try to make the main points of her sermon more memorable by using sermon illustrations, Israelite prophets were sometimes instructed by the LORD to accompany the word they had been given to proclaim with a dramatic act, an act designed to lodge that word more firmly in the minds of the prophet's hearers. In the years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, for example, the prophet Jeremiah had worn a yoke around his neck as a way of emphasising the slavery that was about to fall, not only upon the people of Judah, but also upon the nations with whom the Judeans were allying themselves. Again, at a moment when all hope seemed lost, with Nebuchadnezzar at the very gates of the city, the LORD instructed Jeremiah to buy his cousin's field near his home town of Anathoth. The act, which has to do with the traditional transfer of property from one generation to another within the framework of Israel's laws and customs, speaks more powerfully than words alone could, to point to hope for God's people on the other side of judgement and exile.

The sign-act attains its most elaborate and baroque expression in the life of Jeremiah's contemporary, the prophet Ezekiel. In our first reading for today, you will have noticed how God commands Ezekiel to eat only food that has been cooked over human faeces as a way of symbolising the defilement that will shortly overtake all God's people once Nebuchadnezzar has finished laying siege to Jerusalem and dispersed its inhabitants among the nations, where they, too, will be forced to eat unclean food. You'll also have noticed that, while Ezekiel accepted the performance of the sign-acts commanded of him in vv. 1-8, he baulks at this one. More on this later!

Compared to the sign-acts in Ezekiel, this one in Haggai is, of course, quite tame. Whereas Ezekiel's sign-acts are designed to disgust and repel, this one trades in a very quotidian matter-of-factness (just as many a sermon anecdote makes a similar virtue of the homely and the mundane). Haggai is dealing with the sort of issue that might arise in any culture in which it is vital to make a separation between the clean and the unclean, the holy and the profane.

I've said that for Haggai's first hearers, the sign-act he's performed relies for its intelligibility on its very ordinariness, but given that the culture *we* live in isn't marked by strong ideas around

holiness and pollution, it necessarily appears to us quite exotic and will therefore require a certain amount of imagination to enter into. This is the first significant difficulty raised by our passage, and it's one that we'll return to later.

The second major difficulty raised by this part of Haggai has to do with the 'word' that accompanies the sign-act: 'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.' Modern commentators tend to handle this verse in one of two ways. The first group of commentators understands 'this people and this nation' to be a reference to the group of YHWH worshippers whose base was the city of Samaria and who traced their descent from the peoples settled there by the Assyrians after the fall of Israel's Northern Kingdom two centuries earlier in 722 BC. These commentators note that the word for nation used here – גוי – is generally used to refer to foreign nations and is often pejorative in tone, carrying much the same nuance as it does when we encounter it in a mid-twentieth century novel by, say, Philip Roth or Saul Bellow. These commentators then note that these followers of YHWH posed a significant problem for the Jews who returned to Jerusalem after Cyrus took over the Babylonian Empire. In Ezra 4 we learn that representatives of this group had offered their help in rebuilding the Temple shortly after the return of the first exiles from Babylon, and then, when this help was rejected, exerted their influence with Persian officials to have the building project shut down. In Ezra 5, the second passage we had read out for us this morning, we learn that Haggai and Zechariah's efforts to breathe new life into the building project then sparked further Samaritan opposition. This majority view, then, ties this part of Haggai in quite closely to the concerns of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah.

If this interpretation is correct, then the point of Haggai's sign-act would appear to be this: 'If you allow this group of Northerners to help in the rebuilding of the Temple and to participate in the sacrifices that are made there, then they will defile you by their presence in your midst. You yourselves will not be able to offer sacrifices acceptable to the LORD because what is defiled cannot come in contact with the Holy God.' Obviously, if the priests whom Haggai consulted had been allowing the Northerners to make sacrifices on the (provisional) altar installed at the Temple site, then his words would have been all the more pointed, and their תורה all the more self-incriminating. Now, to modern readers, this all sounds rather xenophobic, and so in fairness to the author of Ezra (and, possibly, Haggai) it's usually pointed out that, according to the writer of 2 Kings 17, the problem with these Northern followers of YHWH was not their worship of YHWH, but their worship of YHWH alongside a number of other gods, as well. And given that idolatry was one of the main reasons God had exiled the Judeans in the first place, this seems to

be quite a sensible reason for excluding the Northerners from participation in the construction and worship of the new Temple.

The second, minority view of Haggai 2:14 takes the words 'this people and this nation' to be a reference to the Judeans themselves. It knows that גוי and גויים are words often reserved for foreign nations, but also knows that this is not always the case. Rather than reading the verse alongside Ezra 4 and 5, it notes that, with the exception of this disputed verse, there are no references to Northerners in the book of Haggai. Instead, they tie v. 18 quite closely to the verses that follow it. In vv. 15-19, God asks the priests to 'consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple.' Can they not see how 'all the work of their hands' had languished? But 'from this day on,' he tells them, 'from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid.' The returnees were to look at the depressed state of their agriculture, place alongside it the date on which the foundation of the new Temple had been laid, and see for themselves that that date would subsequently be recognised as the end of their misfortunes and the beginning of a period of abundance: 'From this day on,' God tells the returnees, 'I will bless you.'

This second group of commentators sees in the reference to 'the laying of one stone upon another' of v. 15 and to 'the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid' in v. 18 an allusion to a special ceremony performed at the site of the Temple, three months into the resumption of work on its reconstruction. These commentators point to the fact that the despoliation and destruction of temples did, in fact, occur from time to time in the Ancient Near East, and that such despoliation or destruction would mean that the temple site would necessarily be viewed as defiled, and no longer fit to serve as a place for the worship of the god to whom that temple had been dedicated. Accordingly, if such a temple were to be rebuilt at a later date, the site would need to be purified and made fit for future worship and sacrifice. We have evidence for such ceremonies in pagan contexts, and we also have Ezekiel 43:18-26. These verses are important for us because in them God shows Ezekiel the kind of sacrifices which would be required if the altar of a restored Temple were to be purified and made ready for renewed acts of sacrifice.

What we don't have is evidence for is that such a purification of the altar did in fact take place after the return of the first group of exiles in 538 BC. The inference, therefore, is that the sacrifices being performed on the makeshift altar used by the returnees and alluded to in Ezra 3 were, in Haggai's (and the LORD's) eyes, illegitimate. The altar remained defiled. Any sacrifices made upon it would also be defiled upon contact with it. The sacrificial worship of the returnees

was – until the rededication of the altar referred to in this passage – unacceptable to God. One of the merits of this interpretation is that it integrates the sign-act of Haggai 2:10-14 much more closely into the overall concerns of the book as a whole, and ties them more straightforwardly to vv. 15-19 of chapter 2 in particular. And that's the reason why I myself think this second view superior to the first.

We've been circling around the question of holiness and defilement for some time now, and clearly, if we're to make sense of Haggai's sign-act, we're going to have to delve more deeply into the ramifications of holiness and defilement for Israel's relationship with God. I've said that Ancient Israel was a culture marked by strong taboos and elaborate regulations concerning clean and unclean, purity and defilement. What does this mean?

It means, amongst other things, that your presence in the Temple is contingent upon being 'clean'. Whoever and whatever is unclean cannot enter the Temple. There are many ways of becoming unclean. Bodily discharges make you unclean. Giving birth makes you unclean. Spreading moulds that eat into the walls of your house make it unclean. Skin diseases make you unclean. Worse still, uncleanness is catching. Whoever and whatever comes in contact with something that is unclean itself becomes unclean. Becoming an exile makes you unclean. Most defiling of all is death.

The various taboos and regulations around purity and defilement aren't about hygiene or public health, and in general they're not about sin, either. Rather—and here I follow the work of British anthropologist Mary Douglas—they use the human body as a way of thinking about the social body. Bodies that leak or bleed, diseases that attack the skin, in which the body is encased, ingesting animals that are themselves unclean, all these threaten the body's integrity. A society that possesses a strong set of taboos around purity and defilement – such as Ancient Israel – is a society where the coherence of the whole takes precedence over the preferences of individuals.

The purity code of Israel as we know it is encased in a story about how Israel travelled out of Egypt and into the promised land. Persecuted by their Egyptians masters on the one hand and feared by those who would become their eventual neighbours on the other, the Israelites move through a hostile and dangerous wilderness in an army camp, in the centre of which dwells their most dangerous neighbour of all – God. Individual preferences have to be rigorously subordinated to the all-important task of keeping the group alive.

The experience of the wilderness generation finds significant echoes in the tribulations of the small community of returned exiles eking out a precarious existence in the ruins of Jerusalem in

the late sixth century BC. Babylon has fallen, but only to have been replaced by an empire even more vast in extent. The community is embroiled in conflict with the Samaritan aristocracy in the North. The land is dry, and, according to Haggai, stands under a curse. Purity is all-important.

I said earlier that exile is defiling. Exile was for Israel like a living death. Exile cut God's people off from the settled tribal life in which ideas about purity and defilement made sense. It cut them off from the temple, from which flowed the holiness of God. Worse still, the Babylonians who invaded the Temple precincts when the walls of Jerusalem were breached – as we saw earlier this year when we studied Psalm 74 – comprehensively defiled the LORD's sanctuary.

And yet, taken as a whole, the tone of Haggai 2:10-19 is remarkably upbeat. And this is because Haggai's focus is not so much on the ongoing defilement that had been vitiating the sacrificial worship taking place on the provisional altar so much as it is on the new future that has been opened up by purification and rededication of the new altar alluded to in verses 15 and 18. As is true of all his oracles, Haggai here looks with confidence to the future that God is soon to bring about for his restored people.

Now for the trickiest question of all! How should we appropriate Haggai's message about purity and defilement for ourselves? Two factors make applying Haggai's words to ourselves difficult. The first has to do with differences between Haggai's community and our own. Unlike the Judeans of Persian-Era Jerusalem, we live in a highly fluid, open society. Many different ethnicities live alongside each another, both in our congregation and in our city. People move into the area, and they also move away. Many of us have family members living interstate or overseas. Mary Douglas would say that in such a community we should expect to find less focus on external markers of purity or defilement and more interest in inner states of mind and motives when assessing actions. And broadly speaking, I think this holds true of us at St George's.

The second factor has to do with how the New Testament church took over ideas related to purity and defilement both in the light of Jesus' teaching and in the context of the mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles that began to spring up all over the Mediterranean in the years after his death and resurrection. Some markers of purity – most notably avoidance of unclean food and avoiding eating with Gentiles – were, not uncontroversially, abandoned. And this had largely to do with the conviction that with Jesus' resurrection the world had entered into its last days and that now was the long-awaited time for God's kingdom to be opened up not only to Jews but to Gentiles, as well. Other purity markers, these often having to do with sexual

behaviour and choice of marriage partners, were retained. This means that New Testament Christianity displays a certain amount of eclecticism as far as purity markers are concerned.

What is, arguably, intensified, however, is that identification I spoke of earlier of the individual, physical body with the larger, social one. Early Christians understood themselves to be members of one body, the body of Christ, and knew that what they did with their body had ramifications that reached out beyond their own individual lives to affect all the members of Christ's one body, the Church. 'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own,' writes Paul to the Corinthians.

Just as Haggai's Judeans could offer sacrifices upon a newly purified altar and have confidence that these offerings would be acceptable to God, so Christians can know that both individually and corporately, God's Spirit dwells in them, consecrating them so that they become a place fit to be indwelt by God. Again, when, at the conclusion of the communion service, we offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice (note: not 'sacrifices' but 'sacri*fice*'!), we are saying that our worship of God has been made possible by Jesus' decisive judgement upon the debased temple of his day and his raising of a new temple to God in his resurrected body, as Jesus prophecies in John 2.

I've found this sermon tough to write. Purity and defilement are concepts far removed from the way most of us live our lives. In addition, applying the concepts to our lives has to be done carefully, given the nuanced way in which Paul adapted them for use in a mixed church of Jews and Gentiles living in the Last Days. But at their heart, purity and defilement are about how we come into God's presence. They're about how we live with God. And that's ultimately what makes thinking about them rewarding for us today. Let's pray:—

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the New Temple of Jesus' body in which we worship you today. Thank you for your Holy Spirit, who sets us apart for your service, and makes us able to come before you. Lord, help us to appreciate something of how our own individual lives have been made members of your Son's one body. Let that guide us in what we do with our own, individual bodies. Lord, soften our hearts, renew our minds, and strengthen our wills, that we may be holy as you are holy.

In Jesus' name, Amen.