



**GENEROUS
ADVENT:
PREACHING HAGGAI
WEEK 1**

Sermon notes: Week 1

A VISION FOR EVERYONE

There is a double movement in Haggai's initial words of prophecy (1:1-4). First, he challenges the governor Zerubbabel and the priest Joshua to listen to what their people are saying: the time is not right. Second, Haggai challenges the people about what they are saying: a ruined Temple but covered or, perhaps, nicely decorated houses.

The word is spoken in the sixth month, August, the time of harvest for grapes and figs. It is spoken on the first day of the month, the new moon, a time of festival and rest (cf Amos 8:5, Hosea 2:11).

Haggai's prophetic word from God speaks into and disrupts a shared, if unspoken, word of the people: it's not the right time to rebuild the Temple. He pulls no punches. The phrase 'these people' in 1:2 is judgement for an implicit rejection of God (Hg 2:14, Isaiah 6:9, and 8:6; and Hosea 1:9).

Haggai addresses as one the religious and secular leadership and the whole people of God. Leaders must listen to the story, to the heartbeat of congregations and communities. And leaders must model the generous response to God's command. But none of us can abdicate personal responsibilities.

The text resists blame and any evasion of personal responsibility. It will not allow us to isolate our economic and spiritual lives. Against a tough economic background Haggai calls Israel to a big vision, audacious to the point of being unreasonable. Stewardship ministry is not only a leadership responsibility nor the privatised concern of individuals. It is the work of all God's people.



NOW IS NOT THE TIME

The people of God worshipped in a ruined temple. They knew the need. They knew the significance of the Temple. There was work to be done but, in an economic crisis, the time was not right.

Haggai challenges the shared story of God's people. The word 'you' is repeated: 'Is it a time for you - yes you! - to be living in your [panelled?] roofed houses while this house remains in ruins?' (1:4)

The Hebrew (*sāpan*) in v4 can mean a roofing or panelling, perhaps highly polished cedar (! Kings 7:3, Jer 22:14). In Haggai's cross hairs may be the relative luxury of some homes. But the word may mean a roof, and Haggai contrasts the private homes and the ruined roof of the Temple.



1:4 may reflect life's necessities or it may challenge affluence and the aspiration to affluence. In their different ways poverty, money anxiety and growing affluence can absorb attention, overwhelm emotions and drain energy. Generous discipleship invites us to align our priorities and lifestyle choices, as we can make them, with God's priorities. [1]

The status quo was not an option, then or now. Each circumstance is different but an Advent faith resists the temptation to defer the joyful obligations of generous discipleship and so push God to the margins of daily life.

CONSIDER YOUR WAYS

Twice, in 1:5 and 1:7, Haggai invites the people to set your heart upon your ways. Note that the same verb is used 2:15 and 2:18.

The heart was understood as the seat of human intellect and will or decision making. The meaning is to consider, to think about what you are doing, your priorities and choices. Consider, says Haggai, the contrasts of your house and God's House. Generous discipleship and Advent reflection asks how often and how seriously we ask about lifestyle choices in the light of Scripture and the needs and vision of our local church.

BAGS WITH HOLES

Haggai graphically describes the situation in 1:6, culminating in the powerful image: 'You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.' The text contains four infinitive verbs giving it a directness, which lends a breathlessness and directness to the text which can be paraphrased as: 'You have sown with the intention of harvesting much, of eating, of drinking, of clothing yourself. The verb for earning wages is given twice for emphasis and means to hire oneself out for wages, denoting a loss of economic earning power. (This is the earliest biblical reference to coined money and to a pouch to hold it.)

[1] *"The conflict between expenditure on luxury homes and worthy support of God's work is still with us". J Baldwin commentary p40 (1972)*

IF YOU BUILD IT

The repetition of *consider your ways* in 1:7 may close the argument opened in 1:5. If so, 1:8 starts a new section. More likely, the repetition introduces a new theme: equal consideration of what the people should do.

Their action is focused into a single verse, v8. The people are to fetch timber and build the House of God. Presumably stone is not mentioned because much of the un-hewed stonework was present or in place.

With that action comes a promise: that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured, says the Lord. The phrase is freighted with meaning. The Hebrew word for 'pleasure' means favour or acceptance. The word for 'honour' is often translated 'glory'. Either God will glorify himself or he will allow himself to be glorified by acceptable worship. It doesn't reflect the vision of God's glory in Ezekiel 10. The solemn phrase 'says the Lord', injects a note of sovereignty and promise to a dejected people.



Haggai's call to rebuild is not about a glorious building but a building that declares glory. As Walter Brueggemann notes with reference to Nehemiah, stronger walls had already been destroyed. The walls were not to keep the enemy out but declare God's presence within. Generous discipleship is not ultimately about meeting the important needs of our church but about honouring God, declaring glory.

Succinctly, v8 outlines action to be taken and blessings that follow. In 1:9-12 Haggai returns to the problems faced by the people - and the reason for those problems. The key is verse 9b: *Why?..... Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.* Literally the text says, each of you running to his own house. It is a powerful image which conveys people rushing to attend to their own affairs.

For Haggai the umbilical connection between the ruined Temple and the struggles of God's people is cleverly expressed. In verse 9 there is a Hebrew play on words between ruin of the temple (*ḥārēḇ*) and drought (*ḥōreḇ*). Dew is mentioned because in the hot weather the crops relied on the morning dew for moisture. Verse 10 continues Haggai's theme, better rendered as, 'because of you the heavens have withheld their dew' rather than 'the heavens above you' in older translations.

The connection Haggai makes between disobedience and an unfruitful land is common in the Old Testament: Amos 4:6-10, found also in Hosea 4:10 and Micah 6:15. In Deuteronomy 28, the curses on the land as a result of disobedience include poor harvests (*Dt 28:38*) and insufficient food (*Dt 28:33*) Leviticus 26:4 promises to rain so the land will produce its crops in response to obedience (*see also Psalms 67:6, 85:12; Zechariah 8:12*). Food and clothing are gifts to all who obey God's word (*Dt 8:10, 10:18*).

Haggai's prophecy never lists sins or calls for repentance. Something else is happening, harder to be aware of, harder to address. The preoccupation with personal priorities, homes, situations absorbs time and attention. But the blessings and obligations of God's covenant with his people do not permit us to defer obedience or allow God to take second place as we 'run to our own houses'. Care, however, is needed at this point:

1. The bible texts address a nation and don't blame individuals for financial distress.
2. This covenant blessing is no 'prosperity gospel' whereby obedience is the golden highway to material wealth.
3. Covenant blessing is rooted not in our obedience but God's gift and

HEAR AND FEAR

The response of both leaders and people in 1:12 is, in English translations, to obey. But the literal meaning is that the people hear the voice of the Lord. It's a common OT phrase and again the language of covenant (Ex 19:3-8) and suggests the blessings of obedience.

First, in 1:13 Haggai speaks a simple but powerful word of encouragement and promise. I am with you, declares the Lord. Again God's word speaks into the shared, if unspoken hopes and anxieties of Israel but this time not as challenge and disruption but encouragement and assurance. Generosity is not going to ruin us but lead us to blessing.

Obedience results in a renewal of promise and a reaffirmation of Israel's identity as God's people. 'These people' of 1:2 are now a remnant (1:12; 14). The phrase is used in Isaiah, Micah and Zephaniah of a chastened, humbled, obedient people (Isa 1:9, 4:2-3 and 30:17).

Finally, there is reference to the 'stirring up' of the spirit of Zerubbabel, Joshua and all the people in Haggai 1:14. The Hebrew verb means 'to disturb' – 'to stir up' and 'to set in motion' – and the phrase is used several times with reference to heads of state (1 Chron 5:26; 2 Chron 21:16, Ezra 1:1)

Generous discipleship shapes not only our actions around money but our heart. It is about how we think and feel around money as well as how we act. Just as Israel is reminded of true identity in their practice of generous obedience so we are reminded that generosity is not only what we do, it is who we are as the people of God.

Twenty three days after Haggai's first prophecy work starts on the Temple: the 24th day of the sixth month (Haggai 1:15a). The reference to the 2nd Year of Darius in 1:15b is attached to 2:1, not to 1:15. Why the delay? Practically speaking there was Sabbath and festival observance where work was forbidden. Surely also, Haggai was ensuring that what today we would call his project team was scoping the work ahead.



Sermon: Haggai 1:1-15a

FIELD OF DREAMS

The film 'Field of Dreams' stars Kevin Costner as Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer. He is out in his cornfield one day when he hears a voice from nowhere saying, 'If you build it, he will come,' – nothing more.

Kinsella builds a baseball field in the middle of his prime field of corn. His neighbours think he is crazy. His wife is worried. He is not sure himself. The baseball field puts huge pressure on his finances; he nearly loses his house. Kinsella perseveres with his Field of Dreams and all ends well. But here's the thing. Building the baseball field was important but the field is about more than baseball. It's about people, and family, and the healing of hurts and about the memories of a community.

(A [trailer](#) of the film (2.24 mins) is available.)

'If you build it, he will come.' 500 years before the birth of Jesus was pretty much what God said to the prophet Haggai. . The 'illogical' thing Haggai was to do was to set about finishing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. It had been looted and burned back in 586BC by the Babylonians. 50 years later the first Jews returned from Exile with the permission and support of King Cyrus and they had laid the foundations but work stopped.

Now it was Haggai's time – and in fact Zechariah as well because the two prophets overlapped. But Haggai faced a problem. There was a cost of living crisis. There was drought. Times were tough. Haggai didn't back down but his message was as crazy as Ray Kinsella's. Build the Temple and he will come.

Haggai asked God's people to put on their spiritual bi-focals. The task in front of them was to build the Temple. But Haggai also asked the people to look into God's new future, a promise of His glory.

Advent also asks us to wear our spiritual bi-focals. First Advent asks us to prepare for the birth of a baby in Bethlehem; to celebrate the dawn of our salvation. We sing *O Come O Come Emmanuel*. Second Advent asks us to look to the return of Jesus as King. We also sing: *Lo, He comes with clouds descending... robed in dreadful majesty*.

Advent means shopping and spending; gifts given and received. It also means money worries for millions. At Christmas 2022: [1]



- **54%** of UK adults felt anxious, depressed or filled with dread about money
- **42%** had to borrow money in 2022 to help make ends meet.
- **29%** is the average increase on our usual monthly spend at Christmas.
- Older data suggested **9 million** people couldn't be sure how long it will take to pay the cost of Christmas.
- On a lighter note, Brits will eat 250 million sprouts, 162 million portions of Christmas pudding, 255 million ladles of gravy and 366 million glasses of wine.

Now, this year we are thinking about a Generous Advent. Haggai helps us here as well. Building the Temple would Israel their energy, their time, their talents and yes, their treasure. Haggai helps with tough questions:

- **How do we live lives of generous discipleship in tough times?**
- **How can Jesus be Lord of our money and possessions when we feel anxious and fearful about the future?**

Let's look at Haggai's message and see what we can learn. I want to talk about three things from chapter one:

AN INVITATION TO DREAM

The first thing to say is that Haggai asks the people of Israel to think big. He tells them in verse 8 to go into the mountains and get the wood and start building. Presumably much of the stone they needed was there and in place. The Temple was the centre of Israel's worship, of Israel's community. It was where God meets his people but it's unfinished and impoverished. Haggai pulls no punches.

- In v2 Israel is not 'my people' but 'these people'. A faithful people do not worship in a ruined Temple. It is a judgement, a call to repent that reflects our Advent preparation.
- Verse 5 reads something like this: 'Is it really a time for you – yes you! – to be living in houses with roofs and God's house has nothing?'

The thing is, the people kind of already knew this to be true. They knew the importance of their Temple as we know the importance of our church. The people knew that the life of God needed to be at the centre of the city, of their community just as we know we are called to follow Jesus in every area of life.

[1][The Money Charity](#)

Research from Sainsbury's Finance (2009) ago suggested that only 56% of people expected to clear their Christmas borrowing within one month, presumably mostly interest free. Nearly 5 million people (12%) estimated that repaying borrowing will take 2-3 months, 1.8m people (4%) estimated it will take 4-6 months, 924,000 (2%) 7-12 months, In fact over 9million people (22%) simply do not know long it will take them to pay off their Christmas debts.

They just didn't think that the time was right. It was something to be done, but not now. They were struggling with their crops and fields and felt they were just about coping. They were not saying building the Temple was the wrong thing to do, just that it is not the right time. But the spiritual effect was to push to the margins of life. They deferred obedience because of circumstances. It was a place of spiritual and economic danger for Israel and Haggai spoke into it.



Haggai asks the people dream a dream. He invites them to a bigger vision. It's not easy, its costly but it's right - and the right time. Building the Temple was not a vanity project. It was a physical sign that God was at the centre of the life of his people. It was a spiritual place of worship and a place where community came together.

Our churches are emerging from a pandemic into a near perfect storm of problems. Some are recovering well, some are growing and many are struggling. The challenges are real. The spiritual danger and the practical implications are as real as in Haggai's day.

The shockwaves of the pandemic, a cost of living crisis, rising interest rates and more create that perfect storm. The danger is these things release an individual and a shared spirit of anxiety and fearfulness. The fear of what might happen can be as hard as living with what has happened. These things can strip away joy in the present and any confidence in the future. They steal vision and purpose. They leave us with a sense of holding back. Just about coping seems enough; for the time being at least. Under this pressure the fault lines quickly appear in our personal and church lives. Visionary plans or projects get put on the back burner. Giving is withheld or reduced and talk of generous discipleship seems foolish. Individually we we retreat into a privatised world, make our financial decisions in a privatised way. We exclude even God from our decisions.

Haggai was right. We cannot let fear diminish our present and our future; diminish our faith and confidence in God's promise to provide.

Spiritually we have to 'go into the mountains'. That's Haggai's challenge and the challenge of Advent. We have lift our eyes from the day to day stuff of getting by. To trust God's promise that what we need will be given to us. To look beyond today to God's future. To do what we need to do to put God back at the centre of our shared life. If he is not there then he is nowhere.

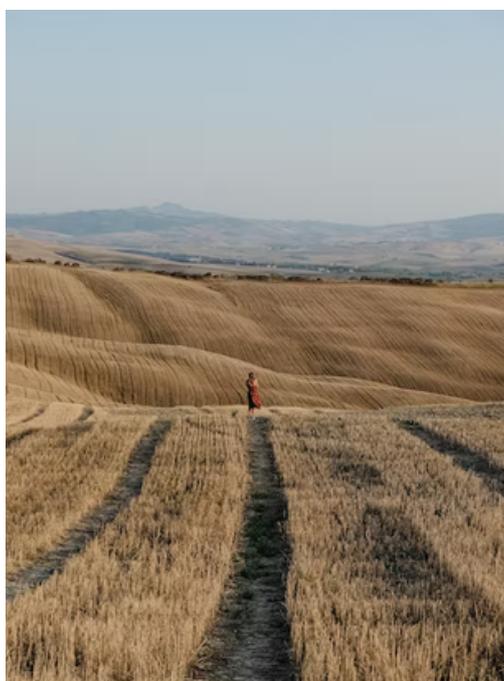
Haggai invites us on a journey into generous discipleship. Our church is inviting us on a journey through Generous Advent. Whatever we call the journey the lovely thing is that we make it together. See how in the opening verses the prophet Haggai addresses the political leader Zerubbabel, the religious leader Joshua and all the people. Generous discipleship is the work of all of us. We can't leave it to the Vicar, the PCC or someone else.

AN INVITATION TO CHANGE

In his opening words Haggai pulled no punches. In verses 5 and 6 he takes the gloves off. Discipleship means asking ourselves the hard questions: *Consider your ways.*

Look at what is happening to you. You plant much but you haven't got a lot to show for it, you drink but you are never full, you eat but you are never quite satisfied, you put on your clothes but you are never quite warm and, that powerful picture, you've got money but you put it in bags that have holes.'

Now for millions this is how it feels, every day. Struggling to pay the bills, never quite able to catch up, using food banks to help spread the cost. Rents rising rapidly and mortgage costs once affordable becoming a real problem. So it's hard to hear Haggai tell us that generosity matters and that God must be at the centre of our lives. But this is the challenge of discipleship. There's no shame in adjusting our giving as part of adjusting our lifestyle to cope with the pressures. But generous discipleship cannot be pushed to the margins of our lives.



And for millions more Haggai's words are a picture of an affluent society. We work longer, harder than ever. We have more than our grandparents could imagine. Yet it never seems enough. We are never quite satisfied.

The best way I can describe it is that money has a gravitational pull on all of our lives. It is different for each of us but it affects us all. We quickly settle for what we have, then want a little more. It doesn't help that we are pretty alert to what everyone else has got. Some people call it an illness, affluenza. We may be under pressure but it is still with us. Maybe we have got 'long affluenza'! It can be hard to hear Haggai tell us that we have to get our priorities right, that we have to put God at the centre of our lives. But these are discipleship questions.

In verse 7 Haggai again tells Israel: *Consider your ways.* But this time Haggai is like the trainer in Israel's corner of the ring. He gives advice, he tells them what to do. They are to go into the mountains to get wood and rebuild the Temple. Because that is the heart of the problem.

For Haggai the ruined temple was the reason for the ruined crops. The land was given to Israel by God, a land of milk and honey. But the fruitfulness of the land was dependent on the obedience of the people. The ruined Temple was a sign of long disobedience and the land would not bear its fruit until it was put right. **What does this mean for us today?** Haggai says to us. 'I want you to put God back at the centre of your personal lives. I want you to put God back at the centre of your church community and your parish'.

Now Haggai is not saying don't be concerned about the day-to-day business of living,. He is not saying don't be anxious if your job is on the line or you are worried about paying rent or mortgage or you need to use a food pantry. These worries matter and it is foolish and hurtful to say otherwise.

But Haggai is asking God's people to think carefully about these things to make sure that they don't push God to the margins of their faith and life. Faith is not a luxury for good times. It is how we live when we are under pressure.

Haggai's picture of 'bags with holes' is a powerful image. But generous discipleship is not just about patching up our bags and waiting for things to get back to normal. We need new bags.

Haggai urged the people of his day to take practical action and start building. The challenge for us is this: what action do we need to take to put God at the centre of our personal finances and church finances?



- Do we need to start budgeting?
- Do we need to talk money with our partner?
- Do we need to start praying about our money choices?
- Do we need to address debt even if it scares us to do so?
- Do we need to make a will?
- And when we have made a will and provided for our loved ones, is it time to leave a gift in our will that will bless our church today and tomorrow?

More than these practical things can we rediscover the gifts of generous discipleship:

- contentment that lets us savour what we have
- gratitude that remembers that all that we have is a gift
- generosity that releases us from wanting a little more. Especially if financially we are in a good place while others in the body of Christ, our church, are hurting

Haggai says, consider your ways, take action to put God at the centre of life. SO what actions do we need to take.

INVITATION TO TRUST

The final part of Haggai's prophecies in chapter one are words that we all need to hear. They are words of promise and words of assurance and words of blessing.

Finishing the walls, putting on a roof and starting to enhance the interior of the Temple was not the final goal of Haggai's vision. As we have said, this was not a vanity building project for its own sake. This was about God's presence at the heart of his people, God's promise to his people, God's glory with his people. Three things happen at the end of chapter one:

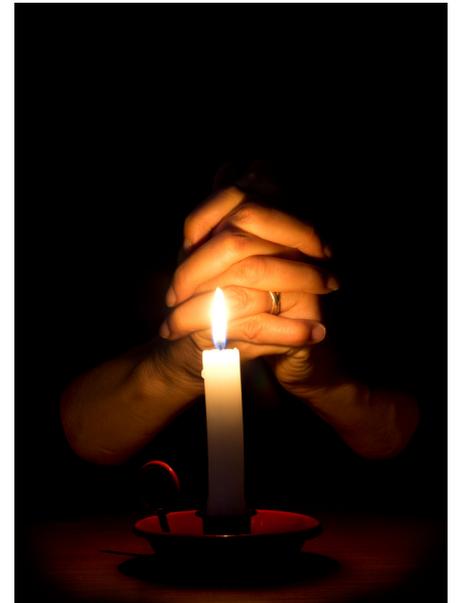
1. In v12 our English bibles say that the people obeyed the voice of the Lord and the words of Haggai. That's the meaning but what it actually says is that the people heard the voice of the Lord. Listening is as important to obeying as considering or thinking is to taking action.

So, are we listening, how are we listening to God to us in troubled times, in this Scripture, this coming Advent?

2. Second, the voice of God in the words of Haggai is spoken to all, leaders and people. And importantly, the Spirit of God is given to everyone. everyone: political and religious leaders and the whole people. Because money matters are spiritual matters and generous discipleship is the work of all God's people.

So, for church leaders - are we praying and working together to address the very real challenges facing this church?

And for all of us, are we praying and are we playing our part in full? Giving generously through the Parish Giving Scheme according to the measure God has entrusted to us?



3. Finally, look at the promises in the final verses. In v2 Israel was 'these people' in their disobedience but now they are the 'remnant'. That's a rich OT word for the humbled and faithful people of God who returned from Exile to Jerusalem. And this remnant hears the promise of God: I am with you. It's the promise given to Abraham, Moses, Joshua and it is given to Israel then and us today. It's a promise for each of us personally and it's a promise for us together as the body of Christ, here in our own church.

God's promise must replace our fear before the Spirit of God can stir up our spirits to faithful stewardship in our churches and generous discipleship in our lives.

So, a last personal question. Do we know the promise of God: I am with you? Can we trust God's promise to provide for our needs? Can we trust someone else if we need help and guidance on our journey of generosity?