



**GENEROUS
ADVENT:
PREACHING HAGGAI
WEEK 2**

Sermon notes: Week 2

A month after the people started work Haggai makes a new prophecy, another word of assurance, encouragement. This word is addressed to the Governor, Priest and People as a whole and again the rich word 'remnant' is used of Israel (cf 1:12, 14). The context is the closing day or so of the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast would have focused the worship of Israel and drawn attention to the parlous state of the Temple.

Again the word spoken addresses the shared, if unspoken narrative of the people. A few knew Solomon's splendid Temple; doubtless some heard stories of that Temple. Many more could recall the completion of the foundations 20 years ago (Ezra 3:10-13). This new Temple may have been physically smaller, although Herod's Temple matched the size of Solomon's structure. It certainly lacked Solomon's the grandeur.

The text reminds us that obedience is not the magic key that unlocks all our concerns, a magic wand that makes everything OK, now. The obedience of generosity is hard won and we need to work at sustaining it over time.

The prophetic task is not only to challenge but to encourage. Haggai's question: Does it not seem to you like nothing? (2:3b) puts into words the unspoken feelings of many if not all the people. Noting the past and, crucially, acknowledging their loss before speaking of the future.



BE STRONG

Haggai first invites courage, in turn, of the secular leader Zerubbabel, the religious leader Joshua and the people. Be strong (hāzaq) is repeated three times in 2:4 and is about pursuing something with diligence and fervour. It is rich with covenant associations. Israel is to be strong entering the Promised Land (Dt 11:8, 31:6), Joshua is famously told to be strong and of good courage (Josh 1:9, 18; 10:25). Note also that the people are now called, 'people of the land'. Again this is the language and promise of the covenant. The phrase affirms their identity as God's people, obedient in building the Temple. Again, the promise in 2:5, I am with you, repeated from 1:13 and restated in 2:5, recalls the promise to Abraham (Gen 26:24, 28:15) and Joshua (Josh 3:7).

A SHIFT OF FOCUS

The second part of Haggai's prophecy shifts the focus in two ways. First, the focus of remembering in 2:5 is not the glory of an earlier temple but God's formative promise to Israel and his presence by his Spirit with his people. The verse can be translated as, *'this is what I promised with you'* or *'this is what I covenanted with you'*. The options translate an unusual phrase, *'the word which I cut'*. More usually the phrase is *'the covenant which I cut'*. The meaning is unchanged.

Haggai's second shift of focus invites Israel to look not backwards to the first temple but forward something new. The glory they remember, the lack of glory which they see now is not the glory which will be. In Advent we pray maranatha and we live in the space between a once and future hope. *'In a little while'* of 2:6 literally means, *'yet one, and it is a little'*. It is found frequently in a messianic context (Psalm 37:10; Isaiah 10:25; Jeremiah 51:33; Hosea 1:4). The 'shaking of the nations' (2:7) speaks primarily of God's sovereignty over all the nations.

SILVER AND GOLD

The word 'desire' in Haggai 2:7 is properly translated 'the treasures of the nations'. The meaning here is those things which the nations desire and deem precious (1 Samuel 9:20; Daniel 11:8; 2 Chronicles 32:27).



Haggai reflects here a biblical theme that the nations will share in God's blessings (Genesis 12:3; Exodus 19:5; Ruth 1:16) and that people will come to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2, Isaiah 60) with their gold and silver (Zechariah 14:14; Isaiah 60:5). Three brief notes are in order.

First, this does not speak of Israel's dominion over wealth. Tributes are brought to the Temple because God is sovereign even over the materialistic might and power of the nations. Gerhard von Rad comments, *'There is no question here of greed for gain, but a proclamation by Yahweh which the prophet sets down with uncompromising boldness...'* [1]

Second, 2:8 makes clear God's ultimate ownership of all material things: to me is the silver and the gold. There can be no clearer witness to the biblical truth that our wealth and possessions are a part of the personal and shared discipleship of God's people.

Gerhard von Rad speaks to the heart of biblical stewardship: *'It is as if they [the silver and gold] have been hitherto on temporary loan and are still held back from their true purpose as property of Yahweh. In the eschaton [the last days- ed.] however, they will return from this misappropriation with the exclusive control of Yahweh, their rightful owner.'*

Third, the sweep of God's sovereignty over all material things goes beyond personal discipleship and beyond the resourcing of our churches, as the next verses portray.

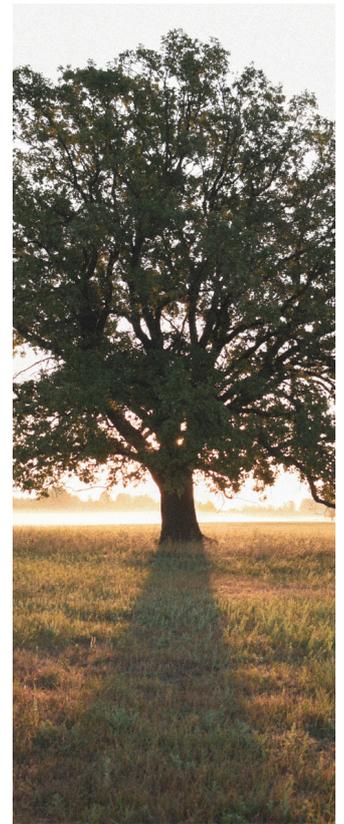
[1] *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, page 240

A GREATER GLORY

The sovereignty of God over all material things leads into the most famous verse in Haggai: *'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,'* says the Lord Almighty (2:9a).

Solomon's Temple in its splendour will be eclipsed by the glory of this second Temple. But those worshipping in this second Temple are asked, as Advent asks of us, to look beyond what we see now to what will be.

This verse helpfully reframes the vision and purpose of our personal and shared journey into generosity. The purpose is not primarily to maintain, beautify our churches although we must do that. The purpose is not to sustain and grow missional ministry, although we must do that. The purpose is not our discipleship acknowledgment of God's ownership and our stewardship of all that we have. Generous discipleship reflects, reveals and responds to God's glory.



THE PEACE OF THE CITY

'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty (2:9b). The phrase Lord of Hosts (NRSV) or Lord Almighty (NIV) in 2:6 is found 300 times in the OT. It is used 14 times in Haggai, 53 in Zechariah, 24 times in Malachi so strongly represented in post exilic prophecy. It's repetition in 2:9 emphasises the parallelism of the verse. Alongside the promise of glory is the promise of peace.

There is a rhyming word play in the text: 'in this Place (*māqôm*) I will give Peace (*shalom*). Place can mean sacred place (Dt 12:5,14; Neh 1:9). 'Prosperity' in some translations of 2:9b is a little misleading. '*Shalom*' is better translated peace or security (Ezek 34:25; 37:26-28). But as we might expect, the verse does not lose a connection with the materiality of that peace.

Jeremiah reminded the Exiles they were in Babylon for the long haul. They should seek the shalom of the city because in the shalom of Babylon lay the shalom of God's people (Jer 29:7). This *shalom* includes material well-being. It embraces the well-being of God's people, the Babylonians and, here in Haggai, the nations of the world.

Stewardship is not solely concerned with our personal discipleship or the life of every church. Generous discipleship reaches into our communities, witnessed daily by food pantries, debt support, warm spaces, groups for all ages and all interests and much more. [1]

Generous discipleship requires us all, together, to be a generous society in which the poor and needy are cared for and not marginalised in the pursuit of profit.

[1] Explore the Network of Kindness at www.togetherliverpool.org.uk

WHOLE LIFE STEWARDSHIP

Please note: the text of Haggai 2:10 -23 is not covered by the second sermon. The following notes are offered should preachers wish to extend the reading and additional material to the sermon.

Two months later, likely 18th December 520BC, Haggai delivers his final two prophecies. A reorientation to generous discipleship is a single decision but an ongoing and nurtured obedience.

Haggai's offers a kind of parable in 2:10-19. What is holy does not automatically consecrate what it touches. But what is unholy will defile what it touches. The rebuilt Temple will not consecrate a disobedient people. Building a new Temple is a sacrament of, not a substitute for Israel's obedience to the blessings and obligations of the covenant.

Holiness in word and sacrament does not of itself guarantee holy living around money. A rich young ruler discovered this, to his sadness (Lk 18:18-29). Once the work is completed there can be no return to the pursuit of material blessings – running after their possessions, attending to their homes. More than that, the shared obedience of generosity that rebuilds the Temple is only a part, however formative and vital, of our obedience in every varied aspect of life.

REMEMBERING MATTERS

The celebration of the early work of hearts and hands in rebuilding the Temple (it was finished four years later) is to be a solemn remembering for Israel. It is a milestone on their journey after Exile. When Israel prepared to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land some of the manna that sustained Israel in the desert was placed in a jar in the Ark of the covenant. It was a reminder to the people in a land of milk and honey of God's provision and God's call to trust and obedience in the desert times.

Here in Haggai this solemn remembering blends the spiritual and the physical, or worship and our life around wealth and possessions. The challenge to consider from 1:5,7 is repeated, twice.

The first challenge looks backward. Israel is to *consider from this day* on that before their shared obedience of generosity the land God gifted was not as fruitful as God's promise intended.

The second challenge looks forward and there is a note of expectation in the framing of 2:19a as a question: is there not seed in the ground and are there not buds in the trees? Hope is not just an attitude or a feeling; hope is the faithful actions we take. Here that hope is located in planting seed and tending trees. *Israel is to consider from this specific day* (2:18a) of Temple rebuilding the promise of God's blessing that accompanies the shared obedience of generosity. *From this day on I will bless you* (2:19b).

Finally, in the prophecy to Zerubbabel the signet ring (2:23) references Jeremiah 22:24-25. The judgement on Jehoiachin is reversed in this time of shaking as God sets Zerubbabel as a signet ring on God's hand.)

Sermon: Haggai 2:1-9

THE PROMISE OF HIS GLORY

Stories of courage are around us:

- Pacifist Desmond Doss, serving as a field medic was awarded the Medal of Honour from President Truman for rescuing over 50 wounded soldiers whilst under fire.
- Irena Sendler smuggled over 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto; captured and tortured after the war she worked to connect parents and children.
- After the Fukushima nuclear power plant tragedy Yasuteru Yamada, aged 72, formed a squad of 400 elderly volunteers to help with the clean up - so younger people did not risk their lives.
- Stationed at Biggin Hill during the Battle of Britain WAAF officers Joan Mortimer, Elspeth Henderson and Helen Turner, stayed at their posts under intense bombing until ordered to leave. They were awarded a Military Medal.
- Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, lighting a candle for civil rights that is still burning.

Here's one more, a bit special. At 6 years old Ruby Bridges was the first black child to attend her previously all white elementary school after Louisiana was compelled to follow earlier federal law making segregation illegal. She was escorted by federal officers every day. White parents initially took their kids out of school. There were protests and abuse. Only one teacher, Barbara Henry, agreed to teach Ruby. They are still friends and to this day Ruby is working for civil rights.

Courage does not mean we are not afraid. It means we do what we have to do even when we are afraid. What we do may seem small but it changes lives; it changes situation.

Why tell these stories? Because when Israel set about building the Temple it wasn't quick and it wasn't easy. Both Ezra and Nehemiah tell us that there was serious opposition from others. But Haggai speaks to something different. Chapter one has a happy ending: they start work on the Temple. Chapter 2 begins with sad, not happy. There was disappointment.



DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

The setting of the early verses of chapter 2 is the Feast of the Tabernacles. For a week the people lived outside of their houses in makeshift shelters. It reminded them of the promises to Abraham, of their journey from Egypt. They remembered the great deeds of God. And then they looked over at an unfinished Temple.

A very few may have seen the splendour of Solomon's Temple. Some will have been told the stories of its gold and jewels. Many will remember finishing of the foundations 20 years earlier and the hopes back then.

But now there is some disappointment. The new Temple just did not compare; it was not impressive. We may know that feeling. A church we used to attend which is closed. A well-loved church re-ordered after a fire. A new church to replace an old one, necessary but memories remain. We may remember larger congregations or lots of children in church.

One month after work started on the Temple Haggai speaks again in chapter 2. He speaks to the disappointment, without pretence, without frustration, without judgement. Wisely, Haggai invites Israel to think about what they have lost before he shares his vision of a new future.. They are given space to grieve before they are encouraged to hope.

The biblical word for this is 'lament.' Lament lets us grieve for what is lost without living in the past. Lament for what is lost does not close down a new future.

Haggai was asking them to give generously of their time, talents and their treasure. The people didn't pause or abandon their journey into generous discipleship. Haggai's message reminds us that generous discipleship is never a quick fix. It is not something we do once and don't have to think about again. It's not something we do alone. Generous discipleship is a journey we take together.

And Haggai reminds us that generous discipleship is a journey into a new future. Generous giving to our church is not about recreating yesterday. It is not about meeting the church's budget, plus inflation, so we can do tomorrow what we did yesterday. Generosity makes new things possible.



A FOUR PART PROMISE

The rich promise Haggai brings to the people is a promise in four parts; or four promises!

First, three times Haggai says, *'be strong'*. He says it to the political leader Zerubbabel, to the religious leader Joshua the Priest and to all the people. The people can be strong because the second part of the promise is, *'I am with you'*. God is with them on this journey to a new future God is going with them. Third, God says, *'my spirit remains with you'*. And finally, *'don't be afraid'*.

Haggai encourages the people as they start to build. And note something in verse 4. They are called, *'the people of the land'*. Remember this is Tabernacles when Israel remembered their wanderings before they settled in the land. And the words *be strong, I am with you* are words spoken to Joshua before Israel crossed the Jordan. Now living in the Promised Land they are obedient in building the Temple and their identity as God's people is reaffirmed. into the Promised Land.

We should also pause and remember here with prayerful sadness the shocking events of October 7th and the ongoing grief in Israel and the tragedy unfolding daily in Gaza.

As in Haggai's day, our journey of generous discipleship will ask something of us. It will ask us to trust God for a new future that is not always obvious. It is not easy to learn to give generously, sacrificially to the work of God in our church and to trust God that he will supply our needs.

But Haggai gives us this rich, four part promise: *Be strong, I am with you, my spirit is with you, don't be afraid*. They are words to encourage and sustain us on our journey into generous discipleship.

God will not fail us.



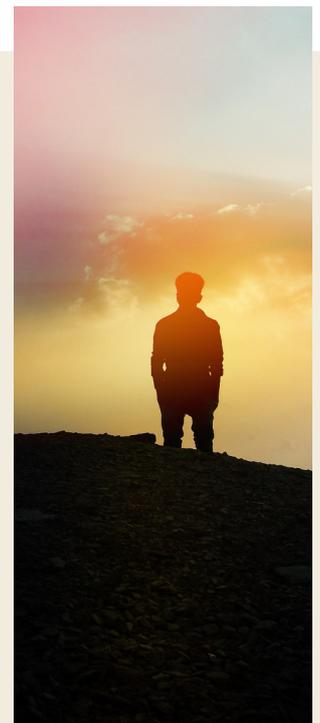
Be strong



I am with you



My Spirit is with you



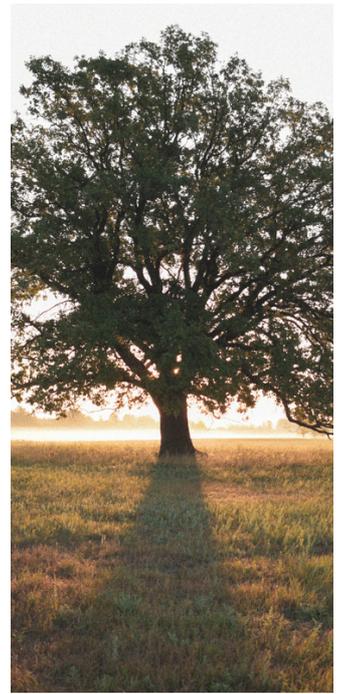
Do not be afraid

THE SHAKING OF THE NATIONS

In verse 6 Haggai tells the people that God will, very soon, shake heaven and earth, sea and land. He will shake the nations.

Now shaking the nations is a very powerful image. It is a good description of what it has felt like since March 2020. We had a taster in 2008 when Lehmann Brothers failed in the States and in the UK our troubles began with the collapse of Northern Rock. Then we have had Covid, rising inflation, a cost of living crisis, massive energy bills, war in Ukraine, and a growing climate crisis.

When Haggai talks of God shaking the nations however, he is talking about God being sovereign God of all things. If you look you will see that four times in verses 1-9 God is not just the Lord, he is the Lord Almighty. It's a phrase that stresses God's power, his rule over all the earth.



However shaky things may seem to us, Haggai is telling Israel that God is ultimately in charge. That God has a purpose for his people and his church, a purpose for the world he made and loves.

Although the Temple is unfinished, although the task ahead is still huge, although there is no money to adorn the Temple like Solomon's Temple God is still God and he has a loving purpose. For Haggai as he spoke to Israel in early October 520BC that sovereignty of God meant two things in verses 8 and 9. And for our stewardship as a church and our generous discipleship as individuals there are some challenges and a final thought to finish this sermon.

THE SILVER AND GOLD IS MINE

First the challenges. Haggai's vision is that the shaking of the nations will bring the wealth or the treasure of the nations of the earth to the Temple in Jerusalem. This vision of the 'wealth of the nations' may sound a little strange to our ears. But whether it is salary, benefits or pension when we go to work or receive benefits, the wealth of the nations is already flowing through our hands. The challenge of Haggai is to let what flows through our hands flow into the service of the kingdom of God.

'The silver is mine, and the gold is mine says the Lord'.

This is the beating heart of generous discipleship. Everything we have, money, homes, possessions – all of it belong not to us but to God. God has entrusted it to us as stewards. But it's not *'our money'* to do with as we like. That's why we say, Sunday by Sunday?

All things come from you:

and of your own do we give you.

To close, a lovely and true story which illustrates this heart of stewardship. The museum at Bentley Motors in Crewe holds a beautiful vintage Bentley Derby. When the owner could no longer drive the car instead of selling it he shipped the Bentley back to the factory in Crewe. He left a note saying that it had been his privilege to drive this beautiful car. But now it was time for him to let go and the car to go home. In the following years he sent the car a Christmas card, signed, 'The Caretaker'.

That is picture of Christian stewardship: to hold something so lightly that we can both enjoy it and let it go. As someone said, perhaps Albert Schweitzer, if we can't let go of something it's not our possession; it possesses us.

We don't all drive Bentleys, we don't all have cars. But God is the true owner of all we have. The challenge is how we live well with what God has entrusted to us.

When we know that all we have belongs to God and is a gift entrusted to us - that's the deal breaker for generous discipleship. It changes everything. We are not giving our church a little from what is ours so we can pay the church bills:

We give generously to say thank you to God for all he has done for us.

We give generously to abundantly resource the ministry and mission of our church.

We give generously to God as worship because our life is an offering of worship.

We give generously because that generous giving sets us free from the gravitational pull of money in our lives.

So, the challenges:

- Does why we give reflect our gratitude and our worship to God who is the owner and giver of everything we have?
- Does what we give to God's work in our church reflect what God has entrusted to us? Or is our giving out of step with our living?
- Does how we give reflect giving as a first priority in our lives, not giving from what is left over when we have done everything else. That's why the Parish Giving Scheme is so helpful. We give on the first day of the month as a symbol of giving, as St Paul says, first to the Lord (2 Cor 8:5)

Generosity is woven throughout this story of Haggai like a golden thread. Generosity has to be part-and-parcel of the way we think and feel and act - as faithful stewards before God.





HOUSE OF GLORY

Finally, Haggai offers Israel a promise to live by. Disappointed by what they see, by what they feel able build Haggai's promise is this: *The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,*' says the Lord Almighty.

The promise is that whatever we see in front of us, however ordinary, however difficult, it is never primarily about us, never primarily about our church. The purpose of our lives, the purpose of our church is to give glory to God. We said last week that rebuilding the Temple is not a vanity project. The Temple was built so that the glory of God could dwell in the midst of his people.

Haggai, Zechariah and others urged Israel to rebuild the Temple in the centre of the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah would rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple was more spending than Haggai's. Bigger and stronger walls than Nehemiah built had already been destroyed by the Babylonians. Haggai built a Temple and Nehemiah built walls and hung gates for the same purpose: not to keep the enemy out but to declare the glory of God within.

Our generous giving, our generous discipleship is a journey we make, a lifelong journey. It's a journey we make with others in our church. It's a journey that carries the blessing of God: *I will be with you.* It's a journey that sets us free from that gravitational pull of money and possessions.

But in the end all of our life, including our journey of generous discipleship, is not about us, or our church. It is about giving glory to God that he may dwell in our midst and bless the world he has made.

That's Haggai's message.

That is what Advent is all about

Maranatha. Come, Lord, come.

Amen.