

Texts: Haggai 2:1-9; Acts 18:1-11

Sunday 27th October 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder if you struggle with church as it currently is? I wonder if you feel disgruntled about how things are done now-a-days? Or I wonder if you compare our present state as a congregation, or as a national church, even the state of our country, to what it used to be? For some of us, we may have vivid memories of Sunday School numbers in their hundreds, or of the singular focus on a Sunday being church and family life. And maybe you compare what we have now-a-days to that time and you may struggle with that comparison – it may grieve you, sadden you, and maybe even provoke the thought that what we have now is nothing compared to what once was.

You may assume, that such things are felt only by older generations, and so you may also assume that this message is going to be aimed at those of you amongst the older generations – but that is not so.

Feelings of dissatisfaction, even disillusionment with our present experience of church, are not limited to older generations. Those who are younger may not look back to the glory days of a particular congregation, or even to the glory days of a denomination or country, but they may look back to moments when God moved in power in particular places, or even their own lives, those moments when God seemed much nearer than He does in today's church.

What's more, there can be a tendency, across the generations, to hark back even further still – to the early church in the first century and to yearn for those days when the faith was new, and the Spirit moved in such power and the growth and vibrancy of Christianity turned a whole empire upside down.

Dissatisfaction and disillusionment are not limited to any one generation; we all feel it at one time or another.

You may even have felt your despondency and pessimism increase another notch with the recently proposed Presbytery Plan with the reduction in ministers for the Braes area – maybe that news provoked you to think that we are simply managing decline and that the future of the Church in this area is doomed with such a trajectory.

In every age, across all the generations, spanning thousands of years, God's people have had times and seasons where dissatisfaction and disillusionment rise up. In what we read in Haggai today we see those very same feelings.

God's people had returned from exile in Babylonia some twenty years before Haggai began his ministry. A small fraction of the total Jewish community had returned and begun the reconstruction work, but strong opposition from neighbouring peoples soon brought the work to a standstill. And so, in the year 520BC, Haggai is called by the Lord to bring a prophetic message to God's people; coming firstly with a word of challenge to the people, which we read about in Haggai 1 last week, and which Ian superbly covered in my stead...

We heard that the people did respond to the Lord's challenge and they began the work on the temple.

But now a second prophetic word is brought by Haggai and yet it has a different tone. **We read earlier today:**

'On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai...“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 2:1-3)

****We can guess that during the intervening** weeks between the first and second messages that efforts were concentrated on clearing the site of rubble, re-dressing stone, testing the walls for safety, and organizing teams of workmen. Such preparations on a sixty-year-old ruin,**

without any mechanical aids, would tax the endurance of even the most enthusiastic people, so no wonder there was a degree of frustration. But there was another factor.

Progress would have been delayed during the seventh month by the major Jewish festivals on which no work would be allowed. In addition to sabbath days, the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets, and the tenth the Day of Atonement. Then on the fifteenth day the Feast of Tabernacles began.

So, how could there have been any measurable progress in such a short period of time considering the few days the builders had to work? And so, with seeing little real progress, pessimism once again may have set...in amongst God's people, as they became overwhelmed...

by their external circumstances and their internal expectations.

Indeed there was a small proportion of the remnant who remembered the first temple built in the days of King Solomon; a magnificent structure, full of glory in its material decoration, and at one time full of glory with the presence of the Lord dwelling in the Most Holy Place. Some could still remember that structure, which had been destroyed some 60 or 70 years earlier, and compared to it, what they saw before them in Haggai's day was pathetic in their eyes, it was nothing.

And so, maybe people begin to question the call upon their lives – were we really called to return from exile? Maybe we should have stayed in Babylon...

and enjoyed the good life. Were we really called to rebuild the temple when all we have is this heap of rocks? Maybe we should just give up; maybe our leaders were deluded or on an ego-trip; maybe it's better to cut our losses and downsize our dreams and mothball any sense of calling we had to this.

And into that situation God sends Haggai once more – not with a message of challenge, but with a word of encouragement, of exhortation, and the Lord gives two specific encouragements so that His people persevere in their calling.

Firstly, the people are exhorted to find strength in the Lord's presence. **We read today:**

“But now be strong, Zerubbabel,” declares the Lord. “Be strong, Joshua...Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the Lord, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the Lord Almighty. “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you.” (Haggai 2:4-5)

Be strong and work, for my Spirit remains among you. In one form or another this promise is said by God to His people over 50 times across **the Old and New Testaments:**

- **“let them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8)**
- **“go and make disciples of all nations...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)**

- **“One night the Lord spoke** to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you...’” (Acts 18:9-10)

Each time the Lord placed a calling upon His people and promised to be with them.

What is also striking is the similarity of the words from Haggai with what is said to an earlier Joshua in the history of Israel, a Joshua who also led God’s people in equally challenging times. **In the book of Joshua we read this:**

“After the death of Moses...the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant: ‘Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the River Jordan into the land I am about to give to them...As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave

you nor forsake you...Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’ (Joshua 1:1-2, 5, 9)

On both occasions, separated by hundreds of years, we find a Joshua leading the people, and into both situations God speaks a word of encouragement to strengthen them for the calling upon their lives. Now the word of encouragement that **would give strength was similar in both contexts: ‘Be strong...for the Lord your God will be with you’ (Joshua 1:9), or in Haggai: ‘Be strong...for I am with you...my Spirit remains among you.’ (Haggai 2:4-5)**

In both periods it was a crucial encouragement, for in one Moses had just died, their leader. He was the one...

through whom God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and the people would wonder, is God with us still?

In Haggai's time, the people had returned from exile, but after twenty years little had been accomplished with regard to the temple, and maybe they too wondered: is God with us? Does He want this calling fulfilled? Has He given up on us?

Into both situations, God speaks a word of encouragement – “I am with you, I am among you, press on”. At both times, the people of God needed to persevere in the calling upon their lives, and to do so they needed to be strong: strong of conviction, strong in hope, strong in faith that the Lord would come through for

them and strong in faith that the Lord would work through them to accomplish His purposes.

But to find and keep that strength, they needed to have and know the presence of God in their midst. They needed to shake off disillusionment and dissatisfaction by turning their focus upon the Lord, who was among them and working through them, for with a focus on Him the people of God would find new vigour for the calling upon their lives.

I wonder friends, is that what we may be need at this time? **In the midst of our dissatisfaction** and our disillusionment, do we need to pursue the Lord Himself? In whatever way we may be feeling despondent and pessimistic, whether it be in comparing things...

to how they once were, or frustrations with the present, or what the future might look like in our Braes area, do you need to seek the Lord's presence and face?

Because, as I emphasised in the latter weeks of our previous series, we have God's Spirit in an even greater way than what the Lord's people did in Haggai's day. Back then, they relied on prophets and leaders, for it was only key people who had the Spirit of God upon them.

But in this age, through all that Jesus won for us, every person who calls themselves a Christian, is a temple of the Spirit, you have the Spirit of God living within you, and so any Christian can seek and know the Lord's presence in greater and more intimate ways than those to whom Haggai spoke.

Friends, there have been too many instances to count when this has been the case for myself. Even just last week in my own devotions, the Lord gave words of encouragement in the times I spent with Him to sustain me in the call upon my life. Key, for me, and indeed for any of us, is the Bible – it is God’s principle way of speaking to us, and we need to be in the Word so that we can hear God’s words of encouragement, strength and affirmation.

But – it is in the real, dynamic, up-close presence of the Lord that we find strength not to crack up under the demands upon us, nor to give in to the worries that assail us, or turn bitter and judgmental in our present time.

In our dissatisfaction and disillusionment – will we heed the encouragement of the Lord, to draw near to Him and to know that He is with us?

If you're not sure how to go about this, then one practical step would be to listen to the sermon from the 17th of March this year, and download the resources from our church website for that date on the “sermons” page.

But equally, you could join a Fellowship Group, get a copy of the Bible reading notes, come along to one of our prayer times. But let us seek the Lord, one way or another, for He is with us and in His presence we find strength to persevere in our calling.

Now, the Lord also gave a second exhortation to the people of Haggai's time, for He said:

“Do not fear...[For]...In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory...The silver is mine and the gold is mine,” declares the Lord Almighty. “The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house...And in this place I will grant peace.” (Haggai 2:6-9)

In this portion of prophecy, the people are exhorted to overcome fear, they were exhorted to find courage, by trusting in the Lord’s promises. They are to trust that God will move in power and accomplish the calling He has laid upon His people.

The fear that they would have felt would have been of the mighty nations that surrounded them. This remnant of the Jewish people are in a struggling province on the edge of the great Persian empire, dwarfed by it and by the stronger provinces around them. Fear had been evident in the early days of their return from exile, and once again fear is beginning to rise up.

Understandably so, we might say – for they have been called to rebuild the temple, there is opposition against them still, and they have no idea where the resources are going to come from, especially in light of such a poor harvest – where will they get the money for the elaborate decoration that the temple demands?

And so, into this situation comes the word of God, a word exhorting them to have courage by trusting in the Lord's promises. He promises "once more" to shake "the heavens and the earth...[indeed to] shake all nations."

Now, the reference here to "once more" is to jolt their memory back to other times when the Lord caused a shaking upon the land and amongst the nations. In particular, we **read in the book of Exodus:**

"Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled violently." (Exodus 19:16-19)

Here the land shook because of the presence of the Lord. As for the shaking of nations, the exodus of God's people

from Egypt shook that nation to its core, as the Psalmist recalls for us in Psalm 114.

And so, God makes a promise in Haggai's day to shake cosmos and the nations again, such that "what is desired by all nations will come" – i.e. wealth, treasure – and so financial, material provision will be made for the calling upon God's people to rebuild the temple.

Indeed, if we were to go into the book of Ezra, where we read of the wider story and what is happening around and through the people, then we come to see that soon after this prophecy God did meet their financial need.

In chapter 6 of the book of Ezra, we read that the very opponents of God's people,...

the opponents who had hoped to bring the building work to a halt, well these opponents were ordered by the emperor to pay in full the cost of the temple repairs (Ezra 6:8–12).

But the people first had to respond in faith – they had to trust in the Lord’s promises, so that courage could arise, fear be overcome, and the work continue. They could have held back, they could have played it safe, but instead they responded in faith, then the doors began to open, then the resources were provided, and God’s purposes for this time were fulfilled.

We might be tempted to spiritualize these material elements of Haggai’s prophecy. But the Lord did promise to provide His people with the material resources...

for the building of His kingdom purposes. His provision is simply a sign of His sovereignty over these resources as Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos.

And the same is true for the church. This same sovereign God promises to provide the resources for kingdom work in material as well as spiritual ways. The church, as the place of God's presence today, as His present temple, needs material resources to carry out the Great Commission given to us by Jesus, and God does promise to provide those resources (see Phil. 4:10–20; Matt. 6).

Indeed, in this very year, your giving has confirmed this – God has more than given the resources we need as a congregation, because our level of income has gone up significantly...

The question has always been, whether we would be open handed with it; would we give sacrificially, and thankfully we have, we have responded to God's sovereign provision in our lives with generosity towards His Kingdom work.

But let us take the principle of these verses beyond material provision, and let me ask you this friends, what are the promises we are clinging to by faith for our present time? As we face potentially radical changes in how we do church in the Braes area; as we compare church now to church as it once was – what are the promises of God that we are clinging to?

For we need to have those promises and cling to them, because it can be tempting, especially in hard times,

especially in times of dissatisfaction and disillusionment to play it safe, or to bunker down.

But to live in step with the God of Haggai is to place ourselves in the dangerous position of trusting in God's promises; it is placing ourselves in the dangerous position of grasping the hand of our Creator and Redeemer, and walking into the unknown with Him.

Personally, I find some of the **promises of Jesus helpful:**

“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

Or that passage where **Jesus said to the disciples:**

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater

**things than these, because I am going to the Father.”
(John 14:12)**

God used Haggai to call a generation to experience God in the present, not only in similar ways to the past, but in ways that would dwarf the past. That is akin to what Jesus meant when He said: “you will do even greater things than these”. We often see the past as setting up patterns that are insurmountable. **But Haggai encourages us to see the past as only setting precedents that can provide a springboard to even greater miracles.**

To a people who were wavering, laid low with dissatisfaction and disillusionment, the encouragement of God through Haggai is to persevere in your calling by finding strength in the Lord’s presence and courage through the Lord’s promises.

I pray we may be such a people as well, a people who resolve to seek and trust the Lord always. May it be so. Amen.