

**Texts: Haggai 2:10-19; John 15:1-17**

**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 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.**

**When Ian Baillie introduced this series** a few weeks' ago, he outlined what he understood as my reasons for having a series on Haggai. What he was too kind to say was that, I wanted to work systematically through an Old Testament book, but we only had a four week window, so it needed to be a short book – and so the best fitting option was Haggai. You might have expected a more mature or spiritual reason, but that's the honest answer.

**However, my feeling is that it has brought** a timely word for us as a congregation, timely in relation to what is happening around us in the Braes area, timely...

**in our life as a congregation, hopefully timely in our own personal lives as well.**

**In the first week, Ian spoke** on the first chapter and brought home that challenge to each of us: are we putting God first and giving ourselves to His purposes today? It's a question we need to be regularly asking ourselves, because without that core conviction the rest crumbles.

**Then last week we looked at** the first half of Haggai chapter two, and we saw the encouragement of the Lord, in that He seeks to help us persevere in our calling by finding strength in His presence and courage through His promises. And when the going gets tough, it is crucial for us to be seeking and trusting the Lord, and so last week was equally important to hear.

**But when you heard the words in Haggai today, did you get that feeling? Did you think: mmm, sacrifices, defilement, mildew, lack of fruitfulness...wow, this sounds like really relevant stuff!? If you did, you're clearly a more spiritual or knowledgeable than I am, because that was not my first reaction last Sunday night when I began looking at this passage – my first reaction was: God, why have you got me preaching through Haggai?!?**

**But you know, as I've delved into this, as I've read up on the books of Deuteronomy, Matthew, John...I feel like God has made this passage a lot clearer and more meaningful for me, and I hope you'll see its relevance for you and for us as a congregation.**

**To get our heads around this passage** I first want to give you what I think is the summary message of this passage, and then I'll try to help us see where I get that from. So, the summary message of **this portion of Haggai, I think, is this:** *'fidelity over formalities leads to fruitfulness'*.  
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I realise I'm doing that typical old-school preachers' thing of using alliteration, and 'fidelity' isn't a word we often use now-a-days, but go with me on this, and hopefully you'll see why I've summed up this passage as *'fidelity over formalities leads to fruitfulness'*.

**The first four verses of our reading** today are in some ways the weirdest, and seem almost to have no link to the second five verses, but in actual fact they do, and they prepare the way for that second portion.

What God is doing here, is setting the scene for what is to come, and God begins on the positive side of things first, as we all do. **So, God ask the priests:**

‘...“if someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?”’ The priests answered, “No.”’

**(Haggai 2:12)**

And this is a correct answer, **for God's law says** that only what originally touches the offering is made holy; holiness does not pass along the line, as we read:  
“the sin offering...is most holy...Whatever touches any of the flesh will become holy...” (Leviticus 6:24-27)

So, with that correct answer, **Haggai continues:**  
“If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?”

“Yes,” the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.”  
(Haggai 2:13)

Again, a correct answer, **as God's law says:**  
“Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days...Anything that an unclean person touches

**becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening.” (Numbers 19:11, 22)**

**In this case, defilement passes further along the line, whereas holiness did not.**

**And with their correct answer, Haggai continues once more and shares **a startling 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.”” (Haggai 2:14)**

**If you had been part of the Jewish people at this time, such words would have been a real slap in the face, because Haggai is saying here that the offerings and worship they have been giving are seen as...**

meaningless and ineffectual by the Lord. They are meaningless and ineffectual because they are defiled, they are unholy, they are revolting, even abominable, in God's sight, and God sees these offerings that way because the people themselves are unholy.

It sounds really bizarre to us now-a-days, but we need to remember that **God gave the sacrificial system** as a way of maintaining the relationship between Himself and His people – and the people valued that, they valued having a right relationship with God, because they wanted to stay as God's people and enjoy His blessing.

As a result, we read at the start of Ezra chapter 3, that one of the first acts by the exiles after their return was to rebuild the altar amongst the temple rubble...

**They did this because for God's people in the Old Testament, sacrifice was essential to being right with God. And so, one of their first priorities was to rebuild the altar and reinstitute the rhythm of sacrifice in the Holy Land. This reveals the importance they placed on a right relationship and on worship as the people of God, and we might even applaud them for such devotion.**

**Unfortunately, these people did not continue their reconstruction efforts on the rest of the temple, and instead they focused their attention on their own homes at the expense of the temple, which lead to God's challenge through Haggai in chapter 1, for by focusing on their own homes they had disobeyed God's call to reconstruct His sanctuary. As a result, their disobedience made them unholy,...**

thus rendering their sacrifices unacceptable before their holy God and so, the people remained under the judgment of God despite sacrifices, and so their crops failed.

**The point is that the project needed** to progress beyond the “altar” stage; God had called His people to build an entire temple structure, not merely an altar, and until they obeyed Him, they were unholy, their sacrifices were unholy, and so all that they offered was meaningless.

Now, this should have been known by the people, and especially by the priests, which is maybe why God starts with the priests. For in multiple places within the Old Testament we **find such words as these:**

**‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord?’**

**To obey is better than sacrifice,**

**and to heed is better than the fat of rams.'**

**(1 Samuel 15:22)**

**It is obedience to the Lord, fidelity to His voice and commands, that leads to life, to fruitfulness – and the priests should have known this. As a result, God first withheld His blessing from their crops, so as to get their attention, but that didn't turn them from their ways, and so He sent Haggai to spell it out to them, and as we saw at the end of chapter 1, thankfully, the people heeded the prophetic word of God through Haggai, **for we read:****

**'So the Lord stirred up...the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.'** (Haggai 1:14-15)

**They began the work on the temple, they moved beyond a focus on the altar, and so now, in chapter two, three months later, God sends Haggai a third time, not with a word of challenge, but with a reminder of what had come before this day and what lies ahead of their fidelity.**

**Verses 15b-17 rehearse some of this again:**

**‘consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord’s temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord.’ (Haggai 2:15b-17)**

**The same principle is here: sacrifices offered by an unholy people are meaningless and God's judgment remains; the harvest will be poor, whether the harvest of grain or the harvest of grape, it bore less fruit because of the people's disobedience.**

**Before and after these words, however, the Lord gives a word of encouragement, **for we read:****

**“Now give careful thought to this from this day on – ... From this day on, 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. Give careful thought: is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig-tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit...From this day on I will bless you.” (Haggai 2:15a, 18-19)**

**In verse 15, Haggai begins a sentence, then breaks off to remind the people of the past as we saw. But with the same words in v18, ‘...from this day on...’, he returns to the original thread this prophecy: ‘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.’**

**This day, this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, is a crucial day, because it marks a turning point – it marks the point where the people show themselves as truly committed to obeying the Lord, because they lay the foundation of the Lord’s temple. It is a mark of commitment, of intention, that they are going to see this through, and because of that intention, because of that obedience, this day also marks a turning point in their relationship with God, because now He will bring blessing.**

In fact, to really prove that this is **a prophetic word, the Lord adds** at the end here:

**'...is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig-tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.'** (Haggai 2:19)

**This news of forthcoming blessing is given as a prophetic word, as foretelling of what will come about before anyone can predict it. For by this time of the year, mid to late December, there's no seed left in the barn; it's in the ground, it's been planted.**

**And when the people look to the vines and the trees, again there is no sign that something good is coming, the plants have not borne fruit, even though by this point in the year they should have.**

**Into this this bleak situation the Lord gives a word of promise through Haggai, a word of certain hope, that blessing is coming, fruitfulness lies ahead, because they have been obedient, they have shown fidelity to the Lord's command and voice.**

**So, hopefully you can now see why I summarised the message of this passage as: *'fidelity over formalities leads to fruitfulness'*. Fidelity to the Lord's voice and commands is of greater worth than formalities, than sacrifices, services and ceremonies, for it is fidelity to the Lord's commands that leads to fruitfulness, to blessing.**

**And in our heart, we know this. Many are the stories we could tell when we've felt convicted of the right way to go, or directed by the Lord to do something,...**

**and it has led to life. Those times where I have been a terrible husband, grumpy, irritable, and then the nudge of the Spirit comes, a nudge to go seek reconciliation, to say “sorry”, to humble myself. And when I have heeded that voice of the Lord, it has healed the relationship.**

**I've already spoken with you about the times the Lord nudged Gill and I to marry sooner than our parents would have wished, but from it came good. Or, with Friendship Plus, I shared how the Lord led me into ministry, and because of fidelity to the command of the Lord to leave chemical engineering and go study youth work, a path opened up to me that has led to so much good. If I had kept to 'formalities', to the way things should be done, then I would have missed out on so much life and blessing.**

**Conversely, I wonder if this principle** is at the heart of the current state of the Church of Scotland. We as a denomination have not kept fidelity to the Lord's commands, but we sure have kept to the formalities, and as a result, I wonder if the Lord has held back His blessing. For example, we know we have a shortage of ministers, but our ministers have been a large part of the problem, often preaching a less than true gospel, often encouraging the church along paths that are not in keeping with God's commands, and so I wonder if the shortage of ministers is God's judgment upon us – maybe He is calling less people into ministry until such a time as we, and those in ministry, keep better fidelity to His commands, and then He will bring fruitfulness. I can't prove it, but it's certainly a thought.

Another thought that has struck me this last week has been: **I wonder what the New Testament** equivalent of this passage is? Because, we don't live under the Old Covenant, and so God doesn't deal with us quite the same as the Israelites – there is not a list of blessings and curses in the New Testament, as there is in the book of Deuteronomy.

But in reading up on the book of Deuteronomy, I was directed towards our second reading today, John chapter 15, for in that chapter we see that *'fidelity to the command of Jesus also leads to fruitfulness'*. **We see this in a couple key verses:**

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love ...My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has

**no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.””  
(John 15:5, 10, 12-13)**

**If we remain in Jesus, we will bear much fruit. To remain in Jesus, means to obey His commands, and His command here is to love each other, to lay down our lives.**

**Now, obviously, Jesus taught many things, beyond just love for one another, He taught also love for God and love for neighbour. So, fidelity to the command of Jesus here, surely includes not only love for friends and those in the church **but the principle is that** *fidelity to the command of Jesus leads to fruitfulness*, but that fruitfulness only comes about by showing fidelity to the command of Jesus to love, to love well, to love by laying down our lives.**

**And so that got me thinking, where do we need to grow in our love for others? Where are we being called to lay down our lives for one another?**

**Fourteen years of marriage between Gill and I, has rubbed off a fair number of rough edges, though we're still not perfect. Some of those rough edges have been serious things, some have been smaller but still important things. For example, I am terrible at scheduling stuff and putting things in the diary, or making a decision about something, without checking with Gill and including her in the process.**

**I've had to learn that she and I are a partnership, and that to partner with her well, to love her well,...**

means to include her in the decision making and scheduling. It might sound silly way of illustrating this, but hopefully you get the idea: that the tensions in our relationships can show us where we need to grow in love for one another and where we might need to lay down our lives.

**So, I wonder what tensions you would pick on?** What would you highlight? I am not the font of all knowledge, and I don't see and hear everything, but across the Western church, and across our denomination, maybe especially our denomination, there can appear to be a tension at times between the generations. Specifically, there can be a feeling at times, that priority is being given now-a-days to our younger generations, that things are being changed to benefit them, that money is being given to them.

**I wonder if you resonate with that feeling, with that sense of things? I wonder if you have that feeling for what we here at Brightons? If we do feel that way, if we have this tension at Brightons, then **we need to remember the words of Jesus**: ‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ And it is fidelity to this that will bring forth greater fruit in your own life, and maybe through you to the wider church.**

**And it might seem horribly unfair – this place, this way of worship you have grown used to, and it is precious to you. And it is you that has funded the church for decades, and it is by your time and your sweat that there is still a place and community of worship here.**

**But Jesus says: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' So, when it comes to our young people, we need to lay down our lives, and maybe that includes our preferences, our time, our money. **Because you know, or may you don't know**, we have a short window to convince them that this congregation, and this Christian faith, is of relevance to their lives, and that they are truly loved. We probably need to convince them of this before they are ten or eleven years old, because after that, they'll just walk, they will refuse to come to church.**

**My daughter Hope is three years old – we will be here as a family for at least 5 years, God willing, and maybe as many as 20 or more. It is here that Hope's faith will either be helped or hindered in its formative years...**

**And in 20 years' time, when she is a young adult, what do you want Hope's memory to be: that this was a place, a community, who gave themselves in love, who lay down their lives for her, such that her faith blossomed and she grew into a woman of God? Or do you want her in 20 years' time to look back on how we clung to our life, to our way of things, such that it stymied her faith?**

**Quite literally that is the choice we all face, every one of us who is over 18, including myself, that is the choice we face not only for Hope, but for every single child we have contact with as a congregation.**

**Jesus said: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends,' and it is by fidelity...**

**to the commands of Jesus that we will abide in Him, and by abiding in Him, His life will flow through us, impacting our own lives and impacting the lives of those around us, for fidelity leads to fruitfulness, not formalities.**

**Now, it is not just to older generations that this is of relevance, younger adults need to heed this too. We are all called to lay down our life, and how younger adults might show that to older generations may simply be to take notice and give of our time to those more mature members of our congregation. I realise we are all strapped for time, but we are called to lay down our lives. And it's the most beautiful thing seeing the generations come together – what might it look like, if a family invites an older couple, or a few older single people, round for a cuppa, or round for a meal?**

**Friends, we can know a fruitfulness** in our own lives, and a fruitfulness through our lives to others around us, beyond anything we have known or imagined. But fruitfulness comes by fidelity not formality, and in our day, by fidelity to the command of Jesus, to lay down our lives for others, to love others like He loved us.

In our day, in our time of change and uncertainty, I pray we also may be a people who show such fidelity to the command of the Lord that it bears fruit for generations to come. May it be so. Amen.