

Texts: Haggai 2:20-23; John 17:20-26

Sunday 17th 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.

Have you seen that programme on the BBC: ‘who do you think you are?’ I’m not sure it’s still running now-a-days, but you can see a few episodes on BBC iPlayer and sometimes on replays. The basic premise of the show is that various celebrities are helped to explore their ancestry, often discovering secrets and surprises within their family tree. One of the episodes I watched included Billy Connolly, the comedian, and he found out that his great grandmother was baptised in India, even though he thought their background was of Irish immigrants who came to Glasgow for work...

It came as a real surprise to Connelly, to find this out about his family. Knowing the truth about his background reshaped his story, and reshaped his self-understanding, his identity.

That question of ‘who do you think you are?’ is a crucial one for anyone to engage with and understand, because our identity has an effect upon us that sometimes we are unaware of. To have a poor understanding of ourselves can be deeply detrimental to our choices, our aspirations, even our health, and to our peace and joy.

This coming Wednesday is the final week of our Alpha course here at Brightons and it has been a great course – with more folks attending than in previous years and everyone growing in their faith, whether they be long-time church members...

or someone new and simply exploring what it means for their life. If you haven't done Alpha already then I encourage you to think about doing it next year.

One of the most powerful aspects of the course is that the Alpha videos include many stories of how the Christian faith and knowing Jesus has changed people's lives, often bringing great healing for these people. I'd like to play a video of one of those stories for you just now.

(PLAY VIDEO)

Here is an educated, articulate, professional young woman, and she was so very broken. She is typical of us all really, whether inside or outside the church because we all have brokenness within us, and often that brokenness is tied to our identity,...

often a misplaced, unhealthy, even negative identity, and that broken identity can feel like a prison, a prison we so desperately want to be free of.

So, how would you define yourself? What is the voice that goes around in your head, describing your identity? Is it 'failure', 'untrustworthy', 'never good enough', 'ugly', 'unimportant'? The list of possibilities is endless, but to be aware of that inner voice in our heads, and to bring it into God's light is so crucial for us individually, but also for us corporately.

The question, 'who do you think you are?', was also relevant in Haggai's time – for both the people and their leader Zerubbabel.

In previous weeks, we've covered God's summons to the people to rebuild the temple, and to show fidelity to His commands. Throughout there has been this underlying question: who do you think you are? How do you define yourself, O Israel?

We have followed some of their journey, some of their rediscovery, their reawakening of their identity as the people of God, and as such, the need to give of themselves to His purposes and obey His commands. As the people have allowed their identity to be shaped by God's word through His prophet Haggai, they have come into a new season as the people of God, and they are now on the brink of knowing God's blessing like they have never known it before. God has been asking them: are you really my people? Are you willing to show that...

in how you live and in what you give yourselves to? Are you focused on your lives, or will you adopt an identity focused upon my kingdom?

In today's reading, we see that Haggai is sent with a second message on the very same day that he gave that previous word of encouragement. This time, however, the message is to Zerubbabel, to their political leader, titled the 'governor of Judah' in verse 21.

Again, the message here is forward looking – looking ahead to what God is going to do amongst the nations and for the people. **So, God's promise to 'bless' in verse 19, is also connected to this portion: for the previous promise of blessing upon the harvest...**

and of resources for the temple, well that was simply a kind of firstfruits by God, for now God adds that a far greater blessing is to come.

At the heart of what God says here to Zerubbabel is a question of identity for him, and through him to the wider people: who are you Zerubbabel? Are you simply the governor of Judah, or is there something else to you? What is it that defines you?

Because in verse 23 the Lord packs in five very key phrases which begin a monumental change for Zerubbabel and for the people. It might not seem immediately obvious but let me walk us through this verse.

We read this morning: “On that day,” declares the Lord Almighty.’

It begins, ‘on that day’, and this is prophetic language used by all the prophets to point beyond the immediate time to a future time when God will do something significant, when His kingdom will break into our world in even greater measure than we currently see it in Haggai’s time. So, what we read previously in verses 21-22, should be seen in that context – the shaking of the universe, the overthrowing of human power – this is not going to come immediately, but is part of God’s larger purposes and plans, yet it begins now.

For we read **here in verse 23: “I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel...and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,” declares the Lord Almighty.’**

Here four key phrases, as I've highlighted, all point towards Zerubbabel playing a part in God's larger plans and purposes. The language used here is all Messianic language, for in many places in the Old Testament these same words or phrases are used. For example...

'I will take you' – echoes what God said to David: “tell my servant David, “This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel.”” (2 Sam. 7:8)

These words were used by God to remind David of the journey taken and they lie within 2nd Samuel at the point where God promises to David an eternal throne and someone to sit upon that throne,...

someone who will be 'a son of God', and that promised King would become known as the Messiah.

Similarly, 'my servant' became a well-known title for the Messiah, such as in Ezekiel's prophecy: 'I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.' (Ezek. 34:23) What's interesting here is that Ezekiel is speaking this hundreds of years after the death of David, so it's clearly not the original David being referred to, but again that promise to have someone sit on David's throne, a King, and he will be the servant of God.

At the end of verse 23 we read the words 'I have chosen you', and again, this echoes what God said of His servant, the promised Messiah, for we read in Isaiah:

**‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.’**

(Isaiah 42:1)

**Again, Messianic overtones. But in the middle of what
God says through Haggai are these words:**

**‘...my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel...I will make
you like my signet ring...’ (Haggai 2:23)**

**We need to begin with the reference to a ‘signet ring’. As
many of us will know, it was a sign of authority. It would
be worn by the king, engraved with the king’s seal, and
was used to endorse all official documents...**

It was so precious that it was personally guarded by the king, who would wear it and keep it with him at all times.

Now, by referencing this picture, the Lord through Haggai is alluding to an earlier prophetic message given to the line of David in **Jeremiah, where we read:**

**“As surely as I live,’ declares the Lord, ‘even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off...Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule any more in Judah.’
(Jeremiah 22:24, 30)**

In this prophecy, given 80 years before the coming of Zerubbabel, God is saying that He is rejecting...

King Jehoiachin because of his idolatry; that the signet ring, the seal of the office of the Davidic King, was stripped from Jehoiachin and furthermore, in declaring Jehoiachin as “childless” this means that no son of his would ever sit on the throne. This word from the Lord came true and as a result the line of David through his son Solomon was terminated here, and indeed many may have thought that the Davidic line was null and void all together.

But God said to Zerubbabel:

‘...my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel...I will make you like my signet ring...’ (Haggai 2:23)

So, God is taking Zerubbabel and from him the line of David, the line of the Messiah will continue. For, if we were to trace Zerubbabel’s ancestry,...

we'd see that he is within David's family tree, though not an obvious branch of it. Nevertheless, God is addressing the Davidic line through Zerubbabel, and reinstating that line as the signet ring of the Lord, from whom the Messiah will come.

It's a remarkable turn around for the family – a family that was once rejected because of its disobedience, now forgiven and restored, given a royal identity once more. Within these words **we can hear the Lord asking: “Who do you think you are Zerubbabel? Are you simply a governor? Or are you something more?”**

In declaring this over Zerubbabel, the Lord is not only changing the identity of this one man, He is once again summoning all Israel to a royal identity –

to see themselves as the people of God, contributing towards the purposes of God. They are meant to see that the rebuilding of the temple is the first step in God's plan to bring His rule to the nations of the world. The people are also to have a 'kingdom of God' vision, a 'kingdom of God' identity, this is not just for Zerubbabel.

So, it's all about identity: who do you think you are? What defines you? You're past, Israel and Zerubbabel? Are you defined by the decline and failing of previous generations? Or by what the Lord says in this time? Will you heed His word now and embrace an identity within the kingdom of God?

And these are questions that God asks all of us, maybe especially in this time...

Will we, like God's people of old, adopt a kingdom identity and vision? Just like in Haggai's time, we don't know when or how God might fulfil His promise and our prayers for His kingdom to come – but our job, our summons is to adopt a kingdom identity and vision, and as always, we then have a choice to make – will we, or won't we? So, what's it going to be brothers and sisters? What is going to define us?

At an individual level, adopting a kingdom identity is life-giving, faith-increasing and adventure-making. One way I've experienced this in the development of my willingness to pray for and with other people. I began praying with people two months after becoming a Christian; it was just the environment I fell into. So, I got used to it quite quickly and grew to love it.

But as doors opened to new areas of responsibility in ministry, I soon found myself in situations where I needed to pray with people for stuff outside of my comfort zone. It was really daunting; I thought to myself, who am I to pray this? Can I pray this?

But then, I received some really excellent teaching on prayer ministry, and with that came the realisation that by being a Christian, I am truly “in Christ”, as the Bible says. And if I am in Christ, then I am an heir and co-heir of the kingdom of God, I am a son of God, a prince of the kingdom, with authority as an ambassador of the kingdom, with direct access to the throne of grace, seated at the right hand of God in heaven even though my feet walk upon the earth. And if all that is true, which it is,...

if all that is true, then it was time to truly adopt a kingdom identity and vision, a kingdom confidence and passion.

Now, there are times when I have wobbles – when a particular issue may arise for prayer – but then I need to remember that it's not so much the words that matter, but that I am in Christ, and being found in Him makes all the difference. And I tell you, praying with people, laying a hand on their shoulder and bringing them before Father God, it is one of the delights of the Christian life! But it shouldn't be just the minister or the mature few who experience this; this should be prevalent throughout our church family, for if we are in Christ, then we are all sons and daughters of God, indeed, though it sounds odd, we are all princes and princesses of the kingdom!

But how seldom we live in that reality!? We're often scared to pray. We hesitate to step out in faith, not only in prayer, but in a variety of ways. How often we are held back, in fear, because we lack a sufficiently mature kingdom identity.

Just like that woman in the video from Alpha, I think God wants to set us all free and heal our brokenness, and part of that, on an individual level, is to grow in our kingdom identity, to know deep down that we are ambassadors of the kingdom, sons and daughters of the living God such that our lives change and the lives of people around us are changed as well. So, who do you think you are?

Let's take this focus on developing a kingdom identity up to the corporate level; to us as a church family.

We are going into a challenging phase as a congregation, a Presbytery and a denomination. And with challenges and change come questions and tensions including over identity: who do we think we are? Who are we?

This afternoon we have the first meeting of the representatives and ministers from the Braes Churches and the question must be asked: who are we? **What is our principle identity?** Is it Brightons Parish Church, Slamannan Church, Polmont Old Church? Or is it sons and daughters of God, ambassadors of the kingdom? Because, how we answer that, how we see ourselves, is going to shape the conversations and future direction for this area.

So, are we simple governors, or are we in Christ, His signet ring, and dear to the Father? Are we intimidated by the changes that we face, the forces around us, like the Israelites so often were? Or do we see ourselves as in Christ, the Messiah, the One who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah? Are we paupers or are we princes and princesses?

To see ourselves rightly, is so important that even Jesus prayed about it, and probably still prays about it even now as He intercedes for us in heaven. **We read today: ‘I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.’ (John 17:20-21)**

This is at the heart of what Jesus yearns for His church, even today: that we display unity. Now, this is not about uniformity or conformity, as Jesus says, our unity is rooted in the Father and the Son: ‘may they also be in us’ (v21). Our unity is not institutional or organisational, rather it is a living, organic oneness, a unity of being, not only of purpose and action. This unity is not a moral effort powered by human energy and self-will; it is an outworking of our union with Jesus – we are in Him, He is in us, we are sons and daughters of God, branches of the vine, ambassadors of the kingdom, princes and princesses, heirs of Christ. This unity is not so much a by-product of discussion and diplomacy, as it is of worship, repentance and prayer.

And deep down, or at the back of our minds, we know this. If you pray for someone – if you pray for their well-being, and if you wrestle over the things they wrestle with, then you will grow in love for them and you will yearn and ache with the burdens that they feel as well. The Christians I am closest to, are probably those I have prayed with and for, and those that have done the same for me. It's like that in all of life; we all 'love' the children that are around us, but we learn to truly love them as we spend time with them and their families, getting to know their personalities, foibles, and quirks. It's the same with church unity – as we worship and pray and repent together, as we focus together on Jesus, and find in Him our common identity, then the boundaries and walls blur and crumble – it's no longer Brightons Church and Slamannan Church; it's the Church of Jesus Christ,...

and we are together children of God, princes and princesses, ambassadors of the kingdom.

So, who do you think you are? Who are you individually?

Who are we corporately? As we go into this new season, are we going to bunker down, are we going to adopt a pauper mentality and identity? Or, are we going to adopt a kingdom of God, identity understanding ourselves to be in Christ and so conducting our lives, individually and corporately, in light of that?

In our day, in our time of change and uncertainty, I pray we also may hear the summons of God to a kingdom identity and vision. May it be so. Amen.