

Haggai 2:4

“Be strong ... and work. For I am with you declares the LORD Almighty.”

No one can pretend that being a Christian in Great Britain these days is easy

- Many people in church today will have met in buildings that feel almost empty
- People outside of the Christian community point to the church's problems
- While those of us inside the church know more about its problems than they do
- Indeed, the closer you are to the hub of the organised church
- The more you are aware of its difficulties
- Even in larger congregations, the membership is often predominantly elderly
- This means that life in church for younger people can often feel isolating and lonely
- Again, even in larger congregations the membership is often predominantly female
- While this has some obvious advantages for a young man in the church
- It also means that life for the young male can be isolated and lonely
- and for the young woman looking for a marriage partner in the Christian community
- the outlook can be very limited

Meanwhile, in school, college and the workplace – indeed in society in general

- we are at an advanced stage of secularisation
- Christians will readily say that standards in our society and in the media
- Show that Christian values are no longer generally upheld as once they were
- This is probably true but to be fair ‘secularisation’ does not so much mean that
- As the overall decline in belief, so that Christian faith and practice seem to be dying out

The little prophet Haggai prophesied at the end of the Old Testament era

- if the first great migration of Hebrew people was the victory of the Exodus
- the second great migration was the enforced journey of the defeated into Exile
- the remnant of the once great nation of Israel was the province of Judah
- after 70 years in exile, King Cyrus decreed that displaced peoples be allowed home
- The book of Ezra records how Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple
- And he returned the gold and silver articles that Nebuchadnezzar had removed
- So that they could be restored to the temple at Jerusalem

The great theme of the prophet Haggai is the need to rebuild the temple of the Lord

- This is not about church building schemes
- Rather it is about spiritual rebuilding, where the things of God are put first
- The prophet Haggai spoke when it was important that the Judah-ites (or Jews) took stock
- The Jews were in a state of moral paralysis, which accepted as ‘normal’ things that should change
- If that does not sound familiar in the church today, I don’t know what does
- Haggai did not give a list of gross sins, but the people lacked a will to challenge and to change
- This is the word so many Christians need to hear today:
- ‘It does not need to be like this’
- But what the people have to do is to get their priorities right
- It is easy for us as believers to hear these words but feel powerless
- Feeling powerless is not of itself a bad thing – for it causes us to rely on God
- Who spoke to Haggai, and who, I believe, through Haggai, speaks to us

I GOD'S PEOPLE

An obvious and yet important point not to miss is that Haggai is addressing God's people

- The word that Haggai brought to the people of God came at a time of discouragement
- Chapter 2:3 has three rhetorical questions
- A rhetorical question is asked for effect rather than to get an answer
- In posing the question, it gives the listener time to reflect on the issue

Who of you is left that saw this house in its former glory?

- Haggai was not expecting a forest of hands to shoot up
- He was not expecting many at all to say that they had seen Solomon's great temple
- Which had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians
- It is a question comparable with asking people about my home city, Plymouth, before the *blitz*
- Most people who remember Plymouth before the *blitz* have childhood memories
- In an age before photographic records
- Only those who had memories of the former temple could visualise what it was like
- And the number of those was growing fewer and fewer by the year

How does it look to you now?

- There was no way the returning exiles could match the extravagance of Solomon
- Though they were no doubt happy to see the temple rebuilt
- It would have been but a shadow of the former temple built by craftsmen
- Working with imported wood and huge quantities of gold

Does it not seem to you like nothing?

- If those who could remember the former temple in all its glory were thinking it
- Now Haggai has said it – the new is far inferior to the old
- And that fact, along with other depressing circumstances
- Could leave the people feeling thoroughly discouraged

My estimation is that our situation as a Christians in Great Britain today is not so different

- It is very easy to focus on the depressing circumstances around us
- And to feel thoroughly discouraged – but here is the divine antidote
- ‘Be strong ... and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.
- This was the great promise given to Isaac at Beersheba, ‘I am with you’ (Gen. 26:24)
- The promise given to Jacob in his dream of the ladder up to heaven (Gen. 28:15)
- The promise given to Joshua as the Hebrew people camped at Jordan (Josh. 3:7)
- The promise given to Jeremiah called to prophesy to a hostile people (Jer. 1:8)
- And the promise of the Lord Jesus to the disciples at the great commission

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

(Matthew 28:19-20)

It is easy to be discouraged – the more seriously you take evangelism the easier it becomes

- The great antidote to discouragement is to know that God is with us

II GOD'S PRESENCE

‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the LORD Almighty.

(Haggai 2:9)

The very thing that the people could be depressed and discouraged about

- The much more modest temple that they had been able to rebuild at Jerusalem
- After the destruction of the former temple and their years in exile is the point that God addresses here
- To be fair, it sounded rather like wishful thinking that it should ever be the case
- Even after Herod the Great's enhancements of the temple, it was nowhere near restored to its former glory
- And yet the great glory of the former temple was not really its magnificent dimensions
- Its adornments or its furnishings – impressive as these were, the walls were lined with cedar
- the holy place with fir or cypress, everything was overlaid with gold and precious stones
- There were furnishings of bronze and most of all the ark of the covenant, representing the presence of God
- The new temple was not as grand, but to make matters worse, the ark of the covenant was lost

The ark of the covenant was built at Mount Sinai and taken to Canaan, when the Philistines captured it

- The daughter-in-law of Eli, the high priest, gave birth to a son, named ‘Ichabod’
- Saying, ‘the glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of god has been captured’ (cf. Jer. 3:14-17)
- So many unwelcome things came upon the Philistines that they sent the ark back (1 Sam. 6:20)
- When King David took Mount Zion the ark of the covenant was taken there
- And eventually Solomon brought it into the Holy of Holies in the temple
- Where it was a symbol of God's presence, probably until the temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar

In Haggai's time the temple was less magnificent, the ark of the covenant was gone, they were discouraged

- Then Haggai's word from God could not have been more relevant (2:9)
- The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house (cf. HP 267)

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘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 the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

(Haggai 2:6-7)

This is a great Messianic prophecy which we believe is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus

- For Jesus said, ‘I tell you that one greater than the temple is here’ (Matt. 12:6)
- The appearing of Jesus was the appearing of God in person, the people are assured of God's presence
- And are commanded not to be afraid but to work, for them it was a command for the physical temple
- The command to the people of our generation is to work on the spiritual temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17)
- For we are building, under God, something far greater than a temple made by hands (cf. HP 767)

Through an analogy about the transfer of ritual purification (dirt is transferred by touching but purity is not)

- Haggai reminds the people that it is not just the physical rebuilding of the temple
- But the life of faith of the people and their holiness that really counts
- Right actions and right attitudes are what is needed – the people need to change
- Before the rebuilding started being back in the province had hardly been a blessing
- But God's people in God's presence share also:

III GOD'S PROMISE

At the time of Haggai, Zerubbabel was governor of Judah – a Persian appointment

- There was a big difference between things as they were and things as they would be
- Things were difficult and discouraging, the new temple was never going to be as splendid
- But the whole situation was transformed by God's promise, things would not always be that way
- The LORD Almighty was going to shake the nations, but this did not happen in Haggai's lifetime
- And in A.D. 70 this temple, enhanced by Herod the Great, was destroyed – so, was Haggai wrong?
- Look at Haggai 2:6-7, (v. 6 being the only verse from Haggai quoted in the New Testament, Heb. 12:26)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: '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 the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty.

(Haggai 2:6-7)

The Bible records how even Mount Sinai shook when God gave the law to Moses

- It also records that at the moment Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom
- The earth shook and the rocks split (Matthew 27:51), Haggai continues with God's word (Haggai 2:7):

I will shake all the nations, and the desired of nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory.

The visit of wise men from the east to the infant Messiah, shows other nations also were looking for his advent

- The second temple was honoured by the glory of God, quite different from shekinah (Lk. 2:32)

Haggai concludes with a further great prophecy:

The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: “Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

“‘On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”

(Haggai 2:20-23)

In those days, a signet ring corresponded to the crown, throne or sceptre, a token of authority for Zerubbabel

- Jeremiah (22:24) told King Jehoiachin of Judah, he would be like a signet ring removed from God’s hand
- But now that situation is reversed – but we must remember, however, that such a grant could be to an heir
- Zerubbabel is in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus – it is a prophecy of the restoration of glory
- at the time of Haggai, things were discouraging and depressing
- But through the prophet the people were reminded that they were God’s people
- People of faith in Jesus Christ are still God’s people,
- Through the prophet they were reminded of God’s presence
- The presence of Jesus made known in the earthly temple is known by the Spirit now
- And through the prophet they were given God’s promise
- The earth would once more be shaken – the Kingdom of God (unshakable) remains