

PRESENTATION EVENSONG 2019 Haggai 2: 1-9 & John 2: 18-22.

The book of Haggai is one of the Nevi'im – the books of the Prophets- and forms one part of the Book of the Twelve, as the Minor Prophets are sometimes known. They are solely 'minor' on account of length and not because their message is any less valid than the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah; Book of the Twelve, because they were and are scribed on one scroll for use within synagogue worship.

It is an interesting book, because Haggai, like Zechariah and Malachi, it is set during the time of the Persian empire. Indeed, the prophet is meticulous in providing us with a precise historical timeframe in which his prophecies are uttered: namely, the second year of Darius (520 B.C.), and specifically in this passage, the twenty-first day of the seventh month – the 21st of Tishri, the last day of the Festival of Sukkot – the Harvest Festival. Haggai is addressing the political and religious leaders of Israel, Shealtiel the Governor of Israel, and Joshua the High Priest, who, with the exiled nation, have been allowed to return to Judah by Darius, at this point consolidating his Empire after a difficult civil war – so structures of power are already in hand in this restoration. In this passage we see the question about rebuilding the Temple. Indeed, in the previous chapter, Haggai represents God as reprimanding the people because they have returned to live in fine panelled houses in Jerusalem whilst the Temple lies in ruins.

The prophecy we heard talks of God's glory returning to a rebuilt Temple, represented by the understanding of the time where the wealth of the nations would flow through it. The imagery is very direct and contains an immediacy: *'In a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations,'* Normally prophecy is reporting on some rather hazy distance of time. It may be that the rebuilding had already been planned, if not started, as Haggai dates from around the same time as Nehemiah and Ezra when the Temple again became central to worship.

It would be hard for us to imagine or indeed stomach Temple worship. I remember hearing a rabbi describe it in a sermon as nothing much more than a slaughterhouse. No wonder they burnt incense, quite apart from its significance related to prayer. It masked the smell! We get some understanding of its practices from the descriptions laid down in the Books of Torah - particularly Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Following the practices of other religions of the time, the sacrificial system was understood as pleasing to God. It seems so alien to us that we divorce it from the Gospel accounts of the Lord's life. Yet during his lifetime the Temple was rebuilt by Herod in great splendour. This is the world that Jesus inhabited as a faithful son of Israel, brought up by faithful Jewish parents and with which as an adult he was comfortable. Even the feast we celebrate today sees the young child taken to the Temple and Joseph and Mary making the traditional offering of birds in thanksgiving for the birth of their child.

The short passage we heard tonight from John's Gospel is the tail end of the dramatic episode of the cleansing of the Temple. John uses this as the start of the public mission of Jesus. Immediately before this account, he has revealed his glory in a domestic situation at the wedding feast in Cana – an epiphany in so many ways for those present. We are then immediately taken to the Temple during the great festival of Passover. However, even here,

where an angry Jesus is described as using a whip of chords to challenge the money changers and animal sellers in the Temple courtyards, we should not see as an attempt on his part to halt the Temple sacrificial system. In fact, it is a challenge of corruption within the religious system which he directly faces. This challenging is as important to us today as it was to the people of first century Palestine. We have only to see what can happen when clericalism overtakes an institution. Christianity, and particularly the Roman Catholic Church, is necessarily being made to face the consequences of the desire to protect the institution to the cost of righteousness and justice. There will always be those who 'err and stray,' no matter what checks or procedures are in place (and in **any** walk of life) because we are each of us flawed. What Jesus challenges us with in the cleaning of the Temple is a call to continual **spiritual** self-examination and allowing ourselves to be conformed to God's call for us to be 'Children of Light.' We may feel that we can never attain such godliness, yet it is the striving: seeking what Jesus calls us to, journeying faithfully, even if at times the road seems barren.

It is likely that all four Gospels were written after the destruction of the Temple – seen within Judaism at the time as a calamity which we can hardly understand. Yet this very destruction led to the establishment of a new way of worship and of viewing Scripture for Judaism. The establishment of rabbinical interpretation and synagogues as schools of worship lead us directly to modern Judaism.

However, John the Gospel writer leads us on an even greater journey. The authorities demand a sign from Jesus after he has rages about corruption in the Temple, and the words we heard are his response: *'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'* *The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body.'* John, using his favourite device of misunderstanding enables us to read words earth shattering in their directness and implication. Within a space of four verses the whole Temple system is transformed into comprehending the self-offering love of Jesus Christ for the life of humanity. The very glory of God described by the prophet Haggai will now be present in a way humanity is able to grasp – in the Word made flesh – in the face of Jesus Christ.

It is even better than that, because the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ draws each of us into the glory of God, because WE too are part of the body of Christ and reveal Resurrection Life through our witness and the way in which we touch the world. This new temple of Jesus's body is still very much God's dwelling place, the locus of worship (as Brendan Byrne the theologian describes it), offering ultimate reconciliation and transformational renewal – and that is what the Church is called to offer at its best. In fact, even the abandoned sacrificial imagery of Judaism surrounding the Temple worship is now taken on by Christianity, where the cross becomes the sign of 'the Lamb who takes away the Sin of the World,' as John the Baptist says in the first chapter of John's Gospel. The richness of much of this language may be difficult for us to use beyond liturgy because it seems so far removed from who we want Jesus to be and how we present him to those who do not know his transforming Love. Yet the power of such imagery should lead us towards a greater understanding of the one who calls each one of us through his self-giving love to be temples of the Holy Spirit, signs of the body of Christ at work, thus transforming the world through our very actions, words and prayers. Amen



Christ Cleansing the Temple - Bernardino Mei (1605 - 1676) Getty Museum

Haggai 2: 1-9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

John 2: 18-22

The Jews then said to Jesus, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.