

## Online Talk for St Andrews and All Saints

Sunday 3 January 2021

### Ezra – a Story of Rebuilding 1

#### Haggai 2:1-9

##### Introduction

Maybe the most enduring memory of 2020 for most of us will be the sense of loss. Loss of normal patterns of work, changes in shopping arrangements, the loss of particular celebrations such as a special birthday or anniversary. Grieving the normal development of relationships – from the loss of a coffee morning or a pub lunch, clubs and sports, to the postponement of a wedding.

Or worse still, the loss of people we love, even on a temporary basis, and the fact that communal grief is less easily shared as funerals become pared back.

It's tough. But the Bible doesn't avoid this topic. As we look through its pages we're in good company. At one stage in the history of God's people we find a whole nation engulfed by loss for nearly seventy years.

It was the time when the Jewish people were deported thousands of miles away to Babylon. Known historically as the Exile, it robbed them of all they had known. They lost their way of life, and their identity as a nation. We learn from the OT Book of Daniel that when Daniel and his aristocratic friends were taken to serve in the royal court in Babylon, they were given a new diet – non kosher, of course – and new names.

It's no wonder that the poets expressed their loss in songs of lament. Psalm 137

<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.

<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:1-4)

There's no pride or nostalgia here as the writer looks back. They are simply lamenting their losses.

It's a psalm that I've returned to again and again in recent months, not only to pray for my own nation, but for all the nations of the world.

They remembered 'Zion', says the psalmist. Zion is another name for Jerusalem, but it is about more than just a capital city. They are remembering much more than the physical place where they used to live. The image of Zion speaks of the place where God dwells. So Zion can refer to the Temple – the place of the Lord's presence.

In Exile they lost the Temple, and so God's people mourned the loss of a corporate sense of the presence of God. That had always been part of their heritage. When God called a people for himself, he promised Abraham that it would be through them that God's blessing would come to the whole world. The people of God, especially since the coming of Jesus were always called to be his friends, to be in his presence, and to be carriers of his presence to rest of the world.

So after the Exodus from Egypt the Hebrew people knew God's blessing on their wilderness journey through his presence in their midst, represented by the Ark of the Covenant.

Eventually the Temple that King Solomon built in Jerusalem represented the presence of God amongst them.

But when Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem, he sacked the city, looted the Temple and destroyed it, taking with him all of the gold and silver, along with almost all of the people. Only a remnant remained.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been burned to the ground, and in Babylon they now had no building in which to meet for worship; nowhere to remind them that God's presence was with them. And so we read in the Book of Daniel that when Daniel prayed, he would go to his room, and look out of a window that faced Jerusalem. (Daniel 6:10)

Whilst they were away, the land of Israel had been 'in a time of desolation', the Bible tells us at the end of the Book of Chronicles. (2 Chronicles 36:21)

But after almost seventy years, they did return. Through his prophets, God had promised them a new season. And that new season came in three phases with three different groups returning. The first wave returned in 538 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua. The second under Ezra in 458 BC, and still another, a generation later, there was one more group led by a man called Nehemiah.

The first wave under Zerubbabel and Joshua, or Jeshua – his name can be said either way – were the pioneers. They made it their priority to rebuild first the altar of the Temple, and then the Temple itself. The return under Ezra was a different season. Ezra was a great theologian and teacher of the Scriptures, and under him the people of Israel rediscovered the depth of worship of their Hebrew heritage. And finally, under Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, and the city made secure once more.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at the Book of Ezra and its story of rebuilding. This OT book covers most of the journey of the first two groups who returned – how they recovered from loss and started again; what their priorities were, and how they worked on these together. How they rebuilt on the old foundations,

using much of the past that was good, but rediscovering and reinventing it for a new season.

And this week, we're going to begin, not with the historical narrative itself that you will find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but with the voice of God through his prophets. These words from the preachers and prophets were given to encourage the leaders and indeed, all of those who were involved in the rebuilding.

So important were these prophecies to the story that they have books in the Bible of their own – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai and Zechariah. Indeed, Haggai and Zechariah lived through part of the rebuilding era. They appear in Ezra chapter 5 and 6. And it was because the people listened to the Lord's voice through them that in their time, the work prospered.

In that first wave of recovery God sent two complementary prophets: Zechariah, the visionary, to inspire them, and a practical Haggai to urge them on. And we're going to begin our journey in this rebuilding story by listening now to the voice of the Lord through the prophet Haggai, because it gives us the underlying priority when it comes to God's work.

It is God's word for a season of rebuilding.

It would be useful to have a Bible in front of you, where you can find the Book of Haggai in the index.

It comes towards the end of the OT.

**Prayer** Lord God, as we read from your Word now, may your Holy Spirit inspire us to hear what you are saying to us today in this season in the history of your people, in our time and day. In Jesus' Name.

Amen

## **Bible Reading Haggai 2:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: <sup>2</sup> ‘Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Johozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, <sup>3</sup> ‘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? <sup>4</sup> But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. “Be strong, Joshua son of Johozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the LORD, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the LORD Almighty. <sup>5</sup> “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” <sup>6</sup> “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. <sup>7</sup> I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD Almighty. <sup>8</sup> “The silver is mine and the gold is mine,” declares the LORD Almighty. <sup>9</sup> “The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,” says the LORD Almighty. “And in this place I will grant peace,” declares the LORD Almighty.’

### **A New Calling for a Different Season**

Haggai’s prophecy begins with a rebuke. In the opening chapter he quotes back to the people the word on the street in Jerusalem. We find in (1:2) that they are saying that ‘the time has not yet come for the Lord’s house [the Temple] to be built.’ (1:2) But, says the Lord’s prophet; it has!

And that’s no problem because God’s word to them, first and foremost, is, ‘I am with you’. (1:14) ‘I am with you.’

So after starting with a rebuke, encouragements follow thick and fast. Look at our reading. (2:4) ‘But now be strong,’ declares the LORD. “Be

strong. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the LORD, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the LORD Almighty. (2:4)

The rebuilding journey may look daunting, you may be wishing you had been born for a different time than this. But all will be well, because ‘I am with you’.

You see, the people’s initial problem was that they were living in the wrong season. Many of them were in last season. The rebuke in Haggai 1 tells them to leave off from polishing up their own fine homes, and attend instead to the Lord’s Temple.

Now when they had been in exile in Babylon the call had been to attend to their own houses. They took note of what the Lord had said through the prophet Jeremiah, and acted upon it.

This was the word of Lord through Jeremiah for the last season. ‘This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.’ ... Increase in number there; do not decrease.’ (Jeremiah 27:1-6)

The call of a previous time had been to look to their own personal affairs and to prosper. But in this new season, the season of rebuilding, the call had changed. And change so often brings fear, and so Haggai reassures them: there is no need to be fearful because the Lord says, ‘I am with you’.

### **A People of the Presence**

Look again at Haggai 2:4-5.

‘But now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. “Be strong, Joshua son of Johozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the LORD, “and work. For I am with you,” declares

the LORD Almighty. <sup>5</sup>“This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.” (2:4-5)

There are echoes here of Moses at the start of the Exodus journey. What Haggai is saying is, consider God’s big picture of salvation – where does the story of your generation fit in with God’s continuing story? He is with his people. When he calls, and we follow, his presence always accompanies us. The journey is always around him, led by him. It’s not about us. It’s all about him.

In (2:5) Haggai takes them back to God’s faithfulness to his covenant commitment to his people as far back as the Exodus from Egypt. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

Remember God’s faithfulness, he tells them. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush – a bush burning by God’s spirit, a powerful picture of the presence of God.

And Moses didn’t want to go, of course. He came up with masses of excuses for not moving on. But ultimately, Moses leads the Exodus from Egypt because of God’s promise, ‘I am with you.’ (Exodus 3:12) If God is calling you, that’s all you need for the journey – God’s Presence on the way.

Learning that God was with him was to be a life-long learning curve for Moses. The story of how he really got the point can be found in Exodus 33. It was at a moment of complete despair and hopelessness. Moses was in the desert, and the Children of Israel had behaved so badly that God decides to wash his hands of them, and start again with someone else. But, ‘Then Moses said to God, ‘If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from

here. <sup>16</sup>How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?’

<sup>17</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.’ (Exodus 33:15-17)

Moses is right. Without the Presence of God, we are nowhere. It is the call of God’s people that we are carriers of the Presence wherever we may be – in the office, at the school, in the home, at the shops ... wherever we may be.

Without him, The ‘I Am’ who is with us and in us by his Spirit, we are not a people at all.

The same is true in every season. We need to go with God’s leading and timing as carriers of his presence. It was always meant to be this way.

So what might that mean for later generations, and for us?

### **In Recovering from Loss we need an Awareness of the Presence of God**

God has always spoken through his prophets, preachers, Bible teachers and leaders.

In the book of Ezra, I mentioned that in the first wave of recovery there were two complementary teachers: Zechariah and Haggai to encourage God’s people.

Towards the end of 2020 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York gave a special address to the Church of England’s General Synod in the light of all that happened in 2020. I haven’t got time to quote all that they said, and it’s worth going to the Archbishop’s website to find out more. But Justin Welby does say that because of 2020, the Church emerging from the shocks of lockdown will be changing.

While the visionary Stephen Cottrell says that our vocation is to be more Christ-centred, and Jesus-shaped in our witness.

More locally, here in Malvern, we can be more Jesus-shaped in our witness to Christ, as we live out what God is saying to us, his people, today. God's word to us in 2021 is to widen our reach. To reach out more deeply in the communities where we operate, carrying with us the presence of God. 'Partnering with God in the flourishing of our communities', as our church strapline says.

One thing that has really helped me in a practical way to do this was the 'Mission Shaped Living' course that some of us were able to do during Autumn Sunday evenings via Zoom. I would say it's the best course I have done in church since I first did Alpha almost thirty years ago.

The 'Mission Shaped Living' course is well named. It has given me a fresh understanding and awareness of how to live in the presence of God, and to take the fragrance of Christ to everyone I meet. For me, it has been life changing. I've really learned to live more in the presence of God, both on my own, and in the company of others.

As we move on into 2021, let's keep Haggai's encouragement before us, to 'Be strong, and work. For' God's promise is that he is with us. As we move on through the Book of Ezra, we'll hear this from others in the story too. Ezra himself is forever repeating, 'the gracious hand of our God was on us'. Zechariah talks about the local community recognizing the presence of God amongst his people. (8:23)  
The characters in this story know what it means for God's presence to be central to our lives.

## **The Presence of God in the Temple**

Finally, I want to go back to the presence of God in the Temple. The initial work in which work in which these people were involved was a bricks and mortar project. They started by rebuilding a temple that had lain in ruins for decades. But to focus solely on the building, is to miss the whole purpose of the Book of Ezra.

When the Temple was dedicated the first time around, Solomon was at great pains to point out that the Temple is not an end in itself. You can read the whole story in 1 Kings 6-8, that was so helpfully explained for us last week.

Solomon says then, 'The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you, God. How much less this temple I have built.' (1 Kings 8:27)

The Temple was not an end in itself. It was a symbol of God's presence amongst them, in their midst. 'I am with you'. And he is here today in our midst.

The NT tells us that as God's people we are the modern equivalent of that Temple – the place where God dwells. Paul writes to the Corinthians, 'we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' (2 Corinthians 6:13)

I've been thankful that in 2020 we've been able to meet online. But it will be so good to get back to being in-person once again. When you lose someone, it's their presence that you miss. And until we can meet again face to face, sensing the presence of God in one another, it's tough. Somehow Zoom is so much harder work.

There is something about the gathered people of God that carries his presence in a really special way. It's what is usually known as 'fellowship'.

There are examples of people without number who turn up to a church service or to Alpha, or some other church activity, and they say, it's so friendly, so welcoming, there is something special about this place – yes, we can answer. It's because God is here. He is with us.

As God's living Temple we are carriers of his Presence.

We need the presence of God in one another, but most of all, we need the presence of God for ourselves.

At the beginning of this new year we're going to have a few moments of silence to seriously consider the challenge of seeking the Presence of God for ourselves.

You might not have done this before, but if the trauma of the last year has left you searching for a meaningful future, if you are spiritually seeking, can I encourage you to draw near to God this morning in the quiet, because God's promise is 'I am with you'.

Take time in the silence now to consider, do I really want to know the presence of God in my 2021 journey?

And am I ready for a new season, journeying with God at the centre of my life?

...

So let's commit these things to God in prayer.

### **Prayer**

In Romans 12 Paul uses the language of the temple to commit ourselves solely to God's purposes.

'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this

is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.' (Romans 12:1-2)

I invite you to pray with me.

**God behind us in the past.**

**God before us, the way ahead.**

**God beside us in this moment.**

**Father, Son and Holy Spirit,**

**it's your Presence that we seek.**

**Lord, we lay our lives before you for 2021.**

**I am no longer my own but yours.**

**May your Presence fill me and empower us**

**For all that lies ahead in this season.**

**In Jesus' Name. Amen.**

Now hear again God's promise through Haggai:

'Be strong, all you people of the land, for I am with you'.

'The glory of this present house', declares the LORD Almighty 'will be greater than the glory of the former house.

And in this place I will grant peace.' (Haggai 2:4,9)