

RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 7: Haggai 1:1-15

INTRODUCTION

Last time we were looking at Ezra 4 and how the Jews in Jerusalem were facing opposition to their faith because of the foul motives and fear of attack from their adversaries and how these very same things can damage our faith today. We see foul motives in our own lives as we act in service of our own purposes rather than God's be that through acting selfishly or through our own inaction. It cannot have escaped your notice that these themes have come plainly into view with the rise of the Black Lives Matter campaign as we see how we in the Church of England have failed to stand against injustice and in some cases have even been guilty of perpetuated racial discrimination in how we appoint clergy. This is just one of many sinful actions, or lack of action, committed by Christians that damages not only the reputation of the Church but also the faith of countless Christians.

Just as foul motives can damage our faith so too can fear of opposition. We do not face persecution in the same way as many of our Christian brothers and sisters overseas do, but in a climate where faith is often ridiculed and regarded as something to keep private it can feel like we too are under attack. This can discourage us, make us afraid, and forget the goodness and faithfulness of God. When this happens it ultimately damages our faith.

But this is not the end of the story for we discovered that we can act against foul motives and fear by turning to Jesus Christ. When we turn to Christ and think about what he would do in any given situation we are guarded against foul motives, both that come from within ourselves and in how we react when people approach us with foul motives. Not only that but in turning to Christ we are reminded of the faithfulness of God, how the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ are all events that are in fulfilment of promises made by God long ago - we follow and worship a God who is faithful. Not only that but he gave us his Church, a community of people, to remind us of the faithfulness of God. So, when we are faced with doubts, or fear, or discouragement, or persecution, we can turn to Christ and know that our God is someone who keeps his promises and will not abandon us and if we are so lost in fear and doubt that we cannot see that for ourselves, we have God's people, his Church, to help bring us back to him and guide us.

That was last time. This time, we are picking up at around the same point in time because although we saw last time that the foul motives and fear that affected the Jews and stopped them from building the temple for 16 years we didn't get any information at all about what exactly happened during those 16 years - what did the Jews get up to instead?

My parents recently retired but just before they did they were asking themselves “What on earth are we going to do with all this time?!” Needless to say they have found plenty of things to keep them occupied during retirement - I’m not sure I have ever seen the garden look so good! And they now live up to that sentiment that I have heard from so many retired people that they’ve never been busier! Given our current situation, when we cannot worship in our usual way on a Sunday or meet together for morning prayer we are faced with that same question my parents faced- what should we be doing with all this time? Is this quieter time an opportunity, a bit like retirement, to become busier than ever before with our faith? That is what we will be exploring today.

INSIGHT FROM THE PROPHETS

As I have said, the book of Ezra gives us no information at all about what occurred during the 16 years that the work on the temple stopped but we do get an indication of somewhere we might find out what happened. In Ezra 5:1-2 we read:

‘Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.’

Now, the prophets throughout the Bible have a reputation primarily for one thing - calling out the faithless behaviour of God’s people and telling them to return once more to God. Given that Ezra 5:2 shows a sudden restart in the building of the temple it would seem that Haggai and Zechariah called out the behaviour of the Jews in those 16 years when the temple wasn’t being built. So to find out exactly what that negative behaviour was and what it might teach us today we’re going to need to look at the books of Haggai or Zechariah.

Now you understand why our reading this morning today was from Haggai 1. It is from this reading that we will discover what the Jews were doing for 16 years instead of rebuilding the temple and discover why they jeopardised their return to worship God, the repair of their relationship with him, and the restoration of their identity as his people.

PRIORITISING PROSPERITY

The behaviour of the Jews in the 16 years when no work was happening on the temple is clearly stated in Haggai 1:9 whilst the temple 'lies in ruins...each of you busies himself with his own house.' During those 16 years when the Jews were too afraid or discouraged to work on the temple they focused on themselves and their needs and not on God. They had prioritised their own prosperity over the work on the temple.

The Jews had given up a lot for God. They had left the land that most of them had grown up in to be faithful and return to God and worship him by rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. But this passion for their faith, this willingness to sacrifice their own comfort for God had gradually faded as opposition hampered the development of their calling. The Jews had not deliberately rebelled against God in fact Haggai not once lists the sins of the Jews like many other prophets do. Rather the Jews had become content with the situation they were in - worshipping in a ruined temple - rather than being dissatisfied with the situation and seeking to continue to do the work of God.

We are all prone to prioritising our prosperity over work on the temple that is ourselves - God's living temple. For us, working on the temple means working on our individual faith but also on building up the rest of the temple - the community of Christians we are a part of. We do this by living the life that God has called us to, devoting ourselves to knowing and serving God and helping others know him too. Our temple work often suffers the same as Zerubbabel's temple. We have all at some point in our lives committed ourselves to following Jesus and had a passion for doing his work and making it a priority in our lives. But perhaps we faced opposition ourselves or disillusionment or unanswered prayer and it became easier to focus on our own lives - our careers, our families, and our hobbies. Or perhaps you just became content with your faith as it was, it didn't need any more work so you could prioritise other things. Whatever your reason, God, his Church, and your faith dropped down your list of priorities. God was no longer glorified in your life but became an activity you fitted in to the rest of your schedule.

We can often come up with excuses for seeking our own prosperity over the work of God. The Jews even tried to excuse themselves saying "the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord" (Hg. 1:2). Last time I said that opposition is no excuse for forgetting God's faithfulness and our call to do the work he has called us to. This time I'm adding to that saying that inconvenient timing, or lack of money is no excuse either. It is easy to make excuses for not prioritising God with our time and money but rather seek our own prosperity - "we're in a recession I can't give right now" or "once I get that promotion I can give to the church" or "life is hectic right now I have no

time for church let alone taking on any other role.”

But this lifestyle of prioritising ourselves over God does not lead to a satisfied life. We see this in the parable of the rich fool where Jesus tells us that ‘life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’ for they only last this lifetime and then are gone (Lk. 12:13-21). Only God can truly satisfy and as Jesus said when we prioritise God and his work everything else will be provided for: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Mt. 6:33).

In the 16 years in which Ezra is silent, Haggai shows us that the Jews had prioritised their prosperity and forgot about God’s work. They did this by making excuses about poor timing and becoming content in worshipping God in a ruined temple rather than continuing the work he has called them to. So what causes the turn around that we read about in Ezra 5:2? What does Haggai say to them to get them to ‘rebuild the house of God’?

PRIORITISING GOD

In Haggai 1:8 we hear Haggai give the Jews an instruction from God. It is an instruction to ‘go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified.’ God wants his people to prioritise him and not themselves, to return to working on the temple rather than their own prosperity. But in order for them to do that God gives another instruction before in verse 7 which lays the foundations for that will enable the Jews to prioritise God once more: ‘Consider your ways.’ The Jews cannot start to do God’s work, to make him their priority, until they have had a time to reflect on their faith and realise that they should not be satisfied with the state of the temple.

When we do not prioritise our faith by seeking to know God and make him known then being a Christian, as I have said, can often become an activity we do rather than something we are. The same is true if we become content in our journey of faith and no longer feel the need to know God more. This means our faith is given it’s time slot in our weekly activities and can be replaced if something else comes up. We need to regularly give ourselves time to “consider our ways” and reflect on our faith to keep our priorities in order. How am I spending my time? Is God my priority? How am I spending the money God has given me? How am I using my status to help the needy and oppressed like Jesus did? Am I content with where we are as a church? What do I need to continue to grow in my faith? It is helpful to write questions like this down so you can come back to them when you re-evaluate to see how you’re doing.

Prioritising God also means making a conscious effort to listen to God. With all the noise of the world distracting us, with temptations or opposition taking us away from God we need to make the effort to listen to God. We need to take God's word seriously and respond to it when we hear it - that's what Zerubbabel, Joshua (Jeshua in Ezra), and the remnant in Jerusalem did. They listened to what God was saying through Haggai and then 'obeyed the voice of the LORD their God' (Hg 1:12). The Jews took what God was saying seriously.

But listening to God's word is not an easy thing to do! In Haggai we have one of the few occasions in the entire Old Testament when a prophet has actually been listened to! Many prophets came before Haggai who attempted to warn the people about the exile to Babylon but they weren't listened to. So why was this different? It is because the Jews humbled themselves and admitted they were wrong. But humility does not come easily! The Bible, God's written word for us today, speaks to us and regularly confronts the way we live our lives, how we spend our money, how we speak, and how we treat others. We can often be called to go against the way society or culture is pulling us, even to go against what we previously thought to be true. But this is what God is calling us to, he is calling us to know him through his word. We need to regularly approach the Bible with humility and submit ourselves before it for only then will our priorities be about knowing God and seeking his will

When we take time to reflect on our faith and take time to hear God's word we are putting ourselves in the best position to make God our priority. This is because of the fear of the Lord. In Haggai 1:12 after the people obey God's word we read 'And the people feared the Lord.' This is a mysterious phrase and is often taken to mean any number of things. Here it shows that the Jews were startled awake by the voice of God. It was almost as if the Jews had been daydreaming - going along their merry business without thinking about whether it was what they were supposed to be doing and then - BAM! - God's word suddenly wakes them up from their slumber! In hearing God speak and reflecting on their ways the Jews remembered who God is - someone to be feared and someone to prioritise. God is ultimately the one with all the power, he is the creator of the universe, our judge, and our redeemer. These are all things that we can know from reading the Bible and reflecting on our faith. If we do not fear God then we are not taking him seriously and he will not be our priority. But he is not looking for us to make him our priority out of fear alone (that would not be in keeping with the God we see in the Bible), rather the fear of God is like a spark from jump leads - it is what gets us started on our journey to prioritise God in our lives. Fear of God is the start, but it is the knowledge of God, of his love and grace shown

to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom we too can receive eternal life, that sustains us as we seek to prioritise God and not our prosperity. In knowing God, both as one whom we fear and as one who loves us beyond comparison, through reflection on our faith and through reading the Bible, we are best placed to make God the priority of our lives.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I started this sermon asking the question “what should we be doing with all this time we have whilst we await the re-opening of our church buildings?” Well I hope I have shown through the prophet Haggai that we should be prioritising God by reflecting on our faith, asking ourselves the difficult questions about where we currently are and where we are going in our faith and that we should be looking to God’s word, as found in our Bibles, to know who God is and to make him known. If we do this then we can avoid the trap of prioritising ourselves which is a path that only leads to dissatisfaction as we start to realise that the things of this world are only temporary, but God and his love for us endures forever.

Amen.