

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope

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Haggai 2:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

I wonder what our answer would be if the prophet Haggai came to us this morning and asked us the question he asked of Zerubbabel and Joshua: "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?" What would we answer to the prophet who came through the doors of the church and demanded that of us? Would we agree with his implied criticism - that the church was not what it once was? Would we defend who we are and what we do and how we worship? Would we look to the building - so often the most contentious thing about a church community - and point out its good parts or become aware of its faults? Would we look at ourselves, as God's people and affirm each other's gifts and service, or apologise for our numbers?

When Haggai came to Zerubbabel and Joshua, he came with a definite purpose in mind. He wanted to stir up the people, through these leaders, to finish the rebuilding of God's Temple. The temple had been destroyed in 586 BC when the Jews were taken in to exile in Babylon. The first chapter of this prophecy tells us that the temple had been begun to be rebuilt, (we know that this was in 538 BC) but enthusiasm of this long-term project had flagged and eighteen years later, the work was still not finished.

Eighteen years is a long time to be worshipping in a building site. It gets you down, especially if you see no progress from week to week. It gets you down and affects your worship and even your view of God. It also affects what you say about the God you worship to others, and how important it is to you to have a proper place to come to worship him. So Haggai wanted to ginger up the people to get on with it and get the work done. His call to consider how it used to look, and compare that with the mess it was in now was not supposed to make the people despair but work on in hope: what had been would be again, not the same but better. The hope came because God was going to help them, God was going to act again, God was with them.

Do you know the joke about the sociologist. It goes like this: a sociologist is a person who, when a beautiful woman enters a room and everyone looks at her, looks at everyone. Why do I tell you that joke? Well, because in many ways the sociologists fulfil the functions of prophets in our age. They look at society and see where it is not working as it ought, where the malfunctions are, what is going wrong. It is sociologists who told us things like tower blocks were not good for people and caused anxiety and isolation: and so gradually tower blocks are being replaced. It is sociologists who see that the destructive behaviours which we know are bad for the planet are so deeply imbedded in our society that we cannot root them out, even though we may say we want to.

Looking at society and seeing where it was going wrong is what the ancient prophets did. They compared what they saw around them to what they knew God's word said ought to be happening and when they saw greed or discrimination, when they saw idolatry or injustice they said so - and often got themselves into hot water for saying so. The difference between them and modern sociologists was that the ancient prophets knew what they had to compare society to. They had to compare it with God's blue-print of what life should be like, how people should live together in community, outlined in the Jewish Law. The prophets had a definite benchmark, while sociologists can see that things are not right, but do not always know what "right" would actually look like. It is easier to know when something is wrong than to know just why it is.

And then the Prophets had faith, and having faith, they had hope. The secular prophets of our society can tell many profound truths, and we should listen to them. But without faith, without the vision of faith they can offer no hope.

One definition of Christianity is that it is the outrageous pursuit of hope. Outrageous because in our hope we do not turn from reality. We do not turn from the fact that our churches are not as full as they were fifty years ago. We do not turn from the poverty and injustice of our society or of the wider world. We do not turn our back on those who suffer. We do not deny that life in this world is far from perfect and is for many full of the most incredible suffering, outwardly and inwardly. We do not deny these things because they are true. But we have faith. And we believe that God knows these things, that God cares about these things, that God can act despite and even through these things. And so, despite what we see and even because of what we see, we have hope.

So what is this hope? How does it show itself? For that we turn to Paul's words to the church at Thessalonica. We read today from Paul's second letter to this church, a church which was much perturbed by different ideas about what the return of Christ and the close of this age of the world would look like. People within their number said this and that, and Paul's instruction to them was to stand firm and hold on tight.

A couple of weeks ago I took the children up the Cairngorm on the mountain railway. If you've been, you'll know that most people are expected to stand for the short trip. And before the train starts up or down you are advised to grasp something and hold tight. It's actually a very smooth ride, but the beginning and the ending have little jerks. Similarly if you have to stand on a bus or a train, you are advised to stand firm and hold on tight, so that you are not knocked off your feet. And such standing firm and holding tight is what Paul tells the Thessalonians to do as well.

They are to stand on the things which Paul has already taught them, things they know to be true, things that their faith has shown them to be real: the supremacy of God, the good news about Jesus, the sanctification (that's that we have been made holy) by the Holy Spirit. They are to stand on these things and hold tight to them, so that when people tell them things that run counter to what they know, they will be able to recognise it and repudiate them.

To have hope does not mean to run after every new thing, any new claim. It does not mean a panicky grasping of excitement. Sometimes in the church we do, or are tempted to do this. We try this or that "to attract people" or "to get the young folk in". Now, attracting people to the gospel is a major part of our mission, and staying still and never changing has never been what the church has been called to do. But there is a difference between finding ways to promote the gospel so that more people can hear it, and running after gimmicks, and we need to be careful and have wisdom to see that difference.

We need to remember the past glory, as Habakkuk said, but also to believe that the splendour to come will be greater than that which has been. And what keeps us rooted and grounded, holding tight and standing firm, is the outrageous pursuit of hope. It is believing that the God whom we worship is God. It is trusting that there is a purpose, and that *we* have a purpose because Jesus came and died and rose for a purpose.

And in a world where many people suffer dreadfully, a world where one in nine Christians knows persecution, where just last week Christians in Baghdad were killed for their faith; and in a society where church is seen to be largely irrelevant and where our faith is totally misunderstood, having hope means living out of that hope. Having hope, pursuing hope, holding on to our hope means acting in such a way as to bring that hope to pass.

Haggai spoke of God's presence and purpose, not so that the people would sit back and do nothing, not to reconcile them to worshipping in a half-finished temple, but to galvanise them into action. He wanted to see the temple finished so that God could use it and do great things. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to hold on to their faith, not by sitting in small groups, covering their ears when anyone else spoke, but by growing in faith, by living what they believed: because that is the way that our faith grows stronger: by acting on it.

So if Haggai, who was a prophet of hope, was to come in today and ask a few questions, what would we say, and, more importantly, what would we do? Would we get defensive or nostalgic? Or would we be encouraged to go on with living out our faith, go on with making it possible to reach out with our faith to others, go on with giving God the very best in worship that we can?

Haggai might ask questions by he would also give us this reassurance: "I am with you, says the Lord of hosts,

according to the promise that I made to you... My Spirit abides among you; do not fear." (Haggai 2:5). Armed with that reassurance, we too can go on with the outrageous pursuit of hope that is the hallmark of our calling.

Amen