

## SERMON – Mysterious hope – God is with us

Read: [Haggai 1:15b–2:9](#), [Luke 20:27–38](#),

When it all seems too hard ...

There hasn't been a whole lot of happy news around recently.

- Politics seems a mess everywhere and (sigh) there is further violence and fighting in the Iraq and Syria
- The Aged Care Royal Commission continues to highlight the lack of good care and properly trained staff in many places
- We hear repeated warnings about climate change and the need for urgent drastic action to avoid catastrophic worsening of the climate

But if we think things are sometimes tough or discouraging for us, spare a thought for the exiles returning to Jerusalem from Babylon around 520 BC. Earlier prophets like Isaiah had painted a glorious vision of a restored city and a rebuilt temple that all the nations would stream to, bringing their treasure.

The reality couldn't have been more different or more discouraging. The city lay in ruins; the people now living in the land were hostile and mocking; just to grow enough food to survive was a struggle.

Where is God in the midst of these ruins and persecution? The message of Haggai is that God is still with them – amidst the rubble and broken dreams – and still has a **future** for the people – if they will have courage and overcome their fear.

History shows that the people were suitably encouraged by the message of Haggai – and later the message of Ezra and Nehemiah – that they did rebuild the temple and re-establish the city of Jerusalem.

## Cynical Sadducees

In the Gospel reading, Jesus is walking in the same rebuilt Jerusalem temple and is confronted by a group of **Sadducees**. They were the priestly group who ran the temple and who worked hand in glove with the Romans to maintain the peace, believing this was the best political strategy to preserve Israel's distinct identity. But unlike the Pharisees, who were regular critics of Jesus, the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection of any sort, and so they were **sad, you see?!**

Their question to Jesus was a rather ridiculous one about the **resurrection**, which they hoped would make a nonsense of the whole idea of life after death. If a woman married a succession of brothers who each in turn died, then whose wife will she be at the resurrection? Jesus cuts through their theological riddle by explaining that existence after death is real but will be of a different order to life as we know it now. People will no longer marry – or be born – or die – but rather we will be more like angels.

Jesus then recalls the incident of Moses at the burning bush where God calls himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God speaks of them in the **present tense** – suggesting that they somehow remain in relationship with God – even though they have physically died. So according to Jesus, God is the **God of the living** – whether people living here on the earth right now – or those who have passed on to new life like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the hope of the resurrection – where we continue to live in relationship with God even after we die.

What this passage – and other similar passages – make clear is **that our relationship with God that is established in this life – will continue on after death**, although it will take a different form to what we experience here. So the hope of the gospel message is that not even death will separate us from the love of God, as Paul writes at the end of Romans chapter 8. And it is this hope that makes a Christian funeral service so much more uplifting – and even joyful – compared to a secular service where death is really the end.

## Seeing with eyes of hope

This is also one of the key messages of Advent that we'll be exploring soon – the idea of **Emmanuel** – God is with us. It's why we light a candle at the start of our worship service – as a visual symbol of God's presence in our midst.

But how does this hope of God's presence and God's promise of new life help us when we face disappointment or discouragement?

Two things stand out to me. The first is that God never promises that our life is going to be **easy** or **without struggle**. Indeed Jesus teaches us to expect suffering and to be prepared to take up the cross.

Resurrection presupposes that death comes first. Sometimes what we hold onto dearly needs to die before there can be new life.

It's challenging trying to hold onto this hope of resurrection when one thinks about the future of the church in Australia. The shape of the future church will almost certainly be different to the church of the past – just look around this place – or how the Croydon congregation will be changed if ElishaCare move into the Hall next door. For those who are interested, ElishaCare is a Christian group in Croydon who work with people recovering from addiction – providing work and community and hope – and who are looking for a new home. The plan is for them to lease the Hall next to the church for 10 years.

If we take Haggai's message to heart, the church of the future may be even **more splendid** than the church of the past – just as a **butterfly** is a creature of beauty and grace but quite different from the caterpillar that preceded it. The transition from caterpillar to butterfly is mysterious but I'm suspecting it's a painful process for the caterpillar.

In the church there has been a transition happening for at least the last thirty years or so – which has been and continues to be painful – but the church of the future has not yet fully emerged. The promise of God though, is that God will be with us each step of the way.

A second point to remember is that each of our readings is written to a **community** which is struggling. We don't face our struggles alone, but together in community. We're to see ourselves as God's family, and when a part of us is struggling, the rest of the community is called to come alongside – to encourage, support and build up. That's exactly what Haggai does. Rather than letting the community slide deeper into despair, Haggai reminds the people that God is still with them and that God's character doesn't change. So if God has always been faithful in the past, so God will continue to lead them into the future. When times are tough, we need to encourage one another and remind each other of God's promises.

### **Walking forward**

But words alone aren't usually enough. So Haggai urges the leaders of God's people to **take courage, overcome their fears and to act**. For the returning exiles this meant taking a step of faith that God would provide for their **physical needs** so they could commit themselves to the slow and demanding task of rebuilding the temple. This was a long term project that took not months but decades and decades of work. Their neighbours thought they were all a little mad, but the people persevered and walked together towards the future that Haggai and other prophets spoke about. They may not have seen the final result but they walked forward in faith and with hope.

The kingdom project that God calls us to is something that demands our efforts over a lifetime, just as it took [William Wilberforce](#) and a large team of helpers a whole generation or more to stop the slave trade. So much of our culture is obsessed with short term thinking and selfish values. Comfort, entertainment and meeting my own needs seem to matter more than blessing others and taking a long term view.

By contrast, God's character inspires us to see all people as made in God's image – and so to work towards justice and peace and a sustainable earth, knowing that God is with us and will continue to walk with us into the future, whatever difficulties and problems we face – even when we don't know the way ahead. Consider the words of this song that picks up some of these

themes.

### INSPIRED BY LOVE AND ANGER

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,  
Informed of God's own bias, we ask him once again:  
"How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?  
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?"

From those forever victims of heartless human greed,  
Their cruel plight composes a litany of need:  
"Where are the fruits of justice? Where are the signs of peace?  
When is the day when prisoners and dreams find their release?"

From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy,  
The fear of lost advantage provoke the bitter cry:  
"Don't query our position! Don't criticise our wealth!  
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth!"

To God, who through the prophets proclaimed a different age,  
We offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:  
"When will the wronged be righted? When will the kingdom come?  
When will the world be generous to all instead of some?"

God asks, "Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?  
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?  
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?  
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

Amused in someone's kitchen, asleep in someone's boat,  
Attuned to what the ancients exposed, proclaimed and wrote,  
A saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools  
Has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools.

(Tune: Sally Gardens (Irish trad.) c. Wild Goose Publications, c/o The Iona Community)

**Or listen to others singing it**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9pS7JS5Rqo>