

GOD'S PRESENCE

Haggai 1:9-15

This week's main reading is from Haggai chapter 1 which you can find on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Last week, Giles gave us an introduction to Haggai, the characters we're dealing with and the historical background. Looking at beginning of Haggai, we saw that God was displeased with the Israelite nation because they had neglected the rebuilding of God's Temple and we saw something of the results of that neglect. This neglect is particularly surprising given that the Temple was, for the Israelites, the place where Yahweh must be worshipped, the unique place of the presence of the LORD. In this weeks reading we see the consequences of the neglect of the Temple rebuilding in more detail. Look at verse 9:

"You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house." (verse 9)

Back in verse 6 we saw that the people had planted much grain in their fields and here in verse 9 we see that they had an expectation of an abundant harvest. But those expectations were not realised "You expected much but it turned out to be little". Their initial evaluation of the crops was not borne out by what the harvest actually yielded. Verse 10 gives us the reason for this:

"Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops." (verse 10)

Returning to verse 9, we learn that even what was harvested was partially destroyed "What you brought home I blew away". Perhaps the stored grain was eaten by vermin or attacked by mould or disease. The text doesn't tell us. But, the important thing is that this shortage of usable grain was caused by God's direct action.

Then we learn why the people have been cursed by the failure of their crops “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house.” This busying themselves with their own houses is particularly scandalous when we remember that the original exiles returned to Jerusalem around 539/538 BC and Haggai is prophesying around 520 BC, almost 20 years after the original return from exile. This means that the returned exiles have had plenty of time to build houses for themselves. They have what they need, but they are not satisfied with that. Now they must be busying themselves enlarging or decorating their houses instead of pursuing other more urgent works – the rebuilding of God’s Temple. Their priorities are precisely the opposite to the law of the kingdom of God which we saw expressed in our reading from Matthew: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33 NIV)

Because the people have lost sight of their priorities and obligations God has sent a drought upon the land as we already saw:

“Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops.” (verse 10)

In a dry hot land like Palestine moisture was absolutely indispensable for successful agriculture and I think the Hebrew word *tāl* used here should be translated as “moisture” rather than as “dew”. When the skies withheld their moisture the land invariably withheld its produce. Indeed, as verse 11 tells us, the effects were much more profound than just a failure of the grain crops:

“I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labour of your hands.” (verse 11)

The effect of the drought is to adversely affect everything that the earth produces: grain, new wine, oil, livestock and indeed everything the Israelites worked to produce. So, the Israelites would be without food or water – they would suffer famine. This was a typical expression of God’s judgement on his disobedient people (2 Kings 8:1; Psalm 105:16). The drought would adversely affect everything in

the territory including wild animals as well as domestic livestock and human beings.

In the OT animals and human beings are related; the animals are part of mankind's environment and the objects of human responsibility. Thus when the people of God consider their ways (vv. 5, 7), they will have to give careful thought to the extent and seriousness of their guilt, which caused the suffering not only of themselves, but also of the whole of nature, especially including the animals.

All this is an inverse aspect of the blessing promised in Leviticus 26:4:

“I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit.” (Leviticus 26:4 NIV)

This is echoed by the Psalmists in Psalm 67:5-7 and Psalm 85:12 and also by the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 8:12).

What is happening is a direct opposite of the blessing, a pronouncement of judgement for disobedience as promised by Leviticus chapter 26:

“If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit.” (Leviticus 26:18-20 NIV)

and also Deuteronomy chapter 11:

“Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you.” (Deuteronomy 11:17 NIV)

So, if the Israelites had given careful thought to what was happening to them, they would have seen the relationship between the drought and crop failure and God's judgment. They were expected to know God's word as expressed in the Law and the Prophets.

But, the Israelites did belatedly respond to God's exhortation to rebuild the Temple expressed through the prophet Haggai, they hear and obey Haggai's message – look at verses 12-15:

“Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD. Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.”
(verses 12-15)

not all Biblical prophets were so fortunate as to have their words favourably received.

If we really hear God's word then we will become obedient to it. As the Israelites respond positively to God's exhortation, God promises to be with them (verse 13) and he activates them in the rebuilding activity (verse 14). This encouragement in verse 13 is a customary assurance of God's merciful guiding presence. This was the experience of people like Moses (Exodus 3:12), Gideon (Judges 6:16) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:8). It was an aspect of Christ's promise to his disciples (Matthew 28:20). The promise of God's personal presence, support, and blessing is the very foundation of the community's consolation, which will enable them to overcome their anxieties and to start anew the work on the temple. Of course, the words of the prophet Haggai, were fully in accordance with the message given to Haggai by God and therefore fully in accordance with the words of the LORD himself. We can see parallels in terms of the word of God given through Moses (Exodus 4:28).

Another aspect of the people's obedience is their fear of the Lord (verse 12). This fear is an expression of the holy awe of the people, their terror because of the wrath that God has visited on them. But

even after the people's disobedience God is merciful, gracious and forgiving and as His people turn back to Him, He says them "I am with you". Our God is a merciful and forgiving God who will hold to His promise to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6) if we only repent of our sins and turn back to Him.

It's worth noting that the stirring up of the spirit of the people to rebuild the temple that we see in verse 14 has had its own history. It already began when the first exiles returned to their country. In Ezra 1:5 it is stated that the community and the religious leaders along with "everyone whose spirit God had stirred" prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. So, it's a comforting thought that God's initiative to "move" the hearts and spirits of his people to become active in his service does not vanish or diminish in the course of time. God doesn't abandon his work! I'm sure that God created this 'stirring up' through the power of his Holy Spirit. As it says in Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty."

At first sight verse 15:

"on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius." (verse 15)

seems like an irrelevant detail. But when we go back to the beginning of chapter 1 we see that 23 days have elapsed since Haggai first addressed the leaders and the people. I think we can assume that the leaders and the people responded favourably to Haggai when he first addressed them. So, the lapse of time was probably just to organise the commencement of the works. Also this time of the year was harvest time, so perhaps that work needed to be finished before work on the Temple began.

So, God has moved the people to work on His Temple. As Paul says: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13, NIV). The leaders are not to be concerned with their own interest but rather God's interests and purposes – in NT terms the church. The leaders and people reacted according to the typical biblical responses to the self-disclosure of

God: they obeyed the word of the Lord, they humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God, and they acted according to his good purpose!

Surely the malaise our world is suffering under is because, like the Israelites in our reading, we have abandoned our God and His laws and are failing to build His kingdom. We're apathetic lazy and uncommitted. We just don't see the need to be committed to and productive for the Lord. The prophet Haggai reminds us to evaluate our lives and circumstances in the light of the word of God and seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Just as the Israelites suffered under drought, we are suffering God's punishment for our waywardness, apathy, and negligence in failing to commit ourselves to serve the Lord and to promulgate his kingdom. The prophet Haggai reminds us to evaluate our lives and circumstances in the light of the Word of God, and to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness as it says in Matthew 6:33. As Jesus says in Luke chapter 14 and verse 26: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26 NIV)

that sounds like a very hard saying, but it's a figure of speech, a hyperbole. What Jesus means is that we must put absolutely nothing ahead of the kingdom of God. We must love our God with all our heart all our mind and all our strength and make him the utmost priority in our lives.

In the NT God's initiative is predominantly revealed through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The response required of the NT Church remains the same as that which was evidenced in the book of Haggai. We need to abandon our own interests and turn back to God obeying all his laws and decrees – most especially His command to believe and trust in Christ as our Lord and master and enter into eternal life in God's kingdom through faith in him.