

**“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – HAGGAI”**

***Haggai 1:1-15***

“*Tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week*” runs an old Spanish proverb. We love putting things off, don’t we? And it’s particularly tempting to put off those things we don’t like doing, or which we find especially difficult. I always find it a bit worrying when I get minutes of meetings I was at together with the agenda for the next meeting, and read that I was supposed to do something pretty important before the next meeting. Life becomes a series of high pressure crises.

And we find ways of putting off what we know we have to do. There are always other, less important, easier things to do than that which we know is vital. We are easily seduced into replacing the important with the urgent. There are always more supposedly urgent things to do when we are faced with something important. When I’m supposed to be writing an article or preparing a sermon or sorting out some vital issue, my desk has never been so tidy and my pencils so sharp!

And it’s just the same story when it comes to doing what God asks us to do, isn’t it? St Augustine, in his Confessions, writes about how he responded to God’s call to him to get his life sorted out: “*I could give no reply except a lazy and drowsy, ‘Yes, Lord, yes. I’ll get to it right away; just don’t bother me for a little while.’ But the ‘right away’ didn’t happen right away; and ‘a little while’ turned out to be a very long while.*” Maybe that’s the source of the apocryphal quotation from St Augustine, “*Lord, make me chaste – but not just yet!*” God has work for us to do, he has something in our life that he wants us to sort out, he has some mission for us (however large or small), and we prevaricate.

It’s always happened, hasn’t it? Moses found his excuses when God called him to liberate his people from oppression in Egypt. Gideon kept wanting more confirmation. Jonah ran away rather than do what God wanted. Jesus had to respond to those of his hangers-on who found excuses not to commit themselves wholly to him. And in the first chapter of Haggai’s little oracle, we read of the people of Israel trying to postpone what God really wants them to do.

Haggai was a prophet, called by God to preach to the Jews who had come back to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. As with most of these other Minor Prophets whose words we’ve been considering over these past few weeks, there’s not a lot to go on about who he was, but we do know he was involved with Zechariah in the reforms that King Josiah initiated, because he’s mentioned in the book of Ezra (in *Ezra 5:1* and *6:14* if you’re interested). We know the timing of Haggai’s prophecy because of what’s described in *Ezra* but also because of Haggai’s very precise dating (*1:1, 1:15, 2:1, 2:10*). God’s people had been exiled in Babylon after defeat by the Babylonians, but Cyrus, King of Persia, had conquered Babylon and issued an edict allowing the Jews to return home to rebuild the Temple, the visible symbol

of God's presence among his people. As I say, you can read about it in the book of *Ezra* earlier in the Old Testament. There had been a bit of a hiatus in the rebuilding, then Darius became King of Persia and gave instructions for the work to continue. But the Jews, who had returned to Jerusalem with great enthusiasm for the rebuilding programme, were no longer quite so keen on the project. They'd settled down and started to get on with their own lives. They had found plenty to do restoring their own homes and feathering their own nests.

Their response to the call to get on with the work God to which had called them was to say, "*The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be rebuilt*" (1:2). They had other matters on their agenda: it didn't really have too much priority for them. So along comes Haggai to bring God's word to them – and that word is what we read in v4. "How come you are living such an easy life and putting all your energies into your own projects when the work God wants you to do is hardly even begun? Here you are in your smart houses, all cedar panelling and posh furnishings, while the Temple is still no higher than the foundations. What's going on?"

And, through the prophet, God tells the people to have a good think about it – "*Give careful thought to your ways.*" That phrase occurs several times in this short prophecy, twice in this passage. Nothing good will come of this selfishness, says Haggai. In vv5,6 we read of the trouble the people are experiencing. There will be no progress until the word of God is implemented in their lives. "Sort yourselves out and get your priorities in order," says God.

And the people do respond. There is a great transformation that gets under way as the priests and other leaders set an example for the rest of the Jews to follow. They obey God and get on with the job because they "*fear the Lord*" (v12). The greatest influence in their lives becomes God. They offer him reverence and respect and obedience. So God moves within them. He "*stirs their spirits*" and equips them for the task ahead. They are motivated and inspired to do what God asks of them and not keep putting it off. It takes about three weeks for the message really to sink in, but in the end they get the drift and get on with the work.

Now, let's ask ourselves some questions as we read this story. It's a story about building God's house and in the past we have, indeed, applied it directly to our situation here in Wade Street Church. We actually called our project to refurbish the sanctuary here "Project Haggai" inspired by this very passage. I'm sure there are clear lessons for us to learn from this – but presumably the Jews of the sixth century BC were unconcerned with things like listed buildings, property committees and long discussions. There are all kinds of ways for us to say, "*The time has not yet come ...*" But to apply this collectively detracts from its clear message to us as individuals. We need not only to see this as a word to the church, but a

personal word to each and every one of us as we gear ourselves up again for the tasks of our programme for the autumn, winter and beyond. And many of you over the past few weeks have very encouragingly commented on how challenging you have found these studies in the Minor Prophets. It's great when people say that a sermon has been particularly good, but something inside of me always says (rather cynically, you may feel), "We'll see". Is it actually going to have any effect on behaviour or attitudes? What are **you** going to do about it? Let's ask the hard questions.

Are you ready to get on with God's work, or just feathering your own nest? "*Is it a time for you yourself to be living in a panelled house while the Lord's house remains a ruin?*" Where are your energies and resources being channelled – into improving your own lot, or into building God's kingdom? God had provided the resources for rebuilding the Temple, but the people had taken them and used them to refurbish their own houses. Everything was in place – except the will of the people to get on with what God had asked of them.

God has given you resources – in most cases, an awful lot of them. You have money, possessions, education, influence, time, energy. Are you using them as God wants you to? Or are you using them solely to improve your own standard of living? There's nothing wrong with enjoying what God has given you, let's not forget that. But let's not forget either that God calls us to use what we have been given to his glory and for his purposes.

Are you putting off the things God wants you to do until you have completed your own agenda? Are you saying, with the people whom Haggai addressed, "*The time has not yet come ...*"? You may have heard God asking you to do something specific for him, or it may be some aspect of your life that doesn't chime in with what the Bible asks of you and you need to sort it out. But it's a lot easier to say "Not yet" than "Yes, Lord, I'll do it." We want to get some other things sorted out first – finish the latest project, move a couple of points up the promotional ladder, see the kids sorted out, enjoy a good foreign holiday.

And we have all kinds of ways of justifying it, don't we? We say we're testing the Lord's word: we want to make sure we're being responsible: we need to seek agreement with everyone involved; it's important to achieve consensus within the family, company, church. But really we're just afraid to take the risk that what God is asking us to do is right. At some point, we have to grasp the nettle and say, "That's it. That's what God wants me to do – I'm going to get on with it." When Sally and I were considering where our future lay as regards following what seemed to be a call to some kind of ministry, we spent ages thinking, praying, talking. And then someone from the church where we were worshipping, someone we didn't really know very well at all – and who certainly didn't know what we were thinking about – took me aside after a service one Christmas and said, "I think God is saying to you that he wants

you to make up your mind and get on with it.” He didn’t know what our situation was or why that should be appropriate, but it was a bolt from the blue for us!

Is God calling you to do something and you are putting it off? Are you finding excuses for not doing what He wants? Are you more interested in getting everything else sorted out first? God is saying that now is the time – now is the time to step out in faith and follow where he is leading.

Do you “*fear the Lord*” or fear other people? The Jews heard God’s message and “*The people feared the Lord.*” That means that these people decided that the greatest influence on their lives should be their God: they were afraid they might let him down and were afraid of the consequences of that. They offered him the respect, reverence and obedience that until then had been sadly lacking. Who has the greater influence on you – your boss, your bank manager, your friends, your family? Or the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth, Saviour of all men and women, Eternal Wisdom?

God told these people that by following his words to them, by getting on and rebuilding the Temple as he had asked, they would be giving him pleasure and honouring him (v8). To whom are you most concerned to give pleasure and honour? Whom do you fear? For many of us, what we fear is other people’s ideas, other people’s views of us. We allow ourselves to be influenced by them rather than by God. We are afraid of what they might think, not of what God might be thinking of us. We are scared that we might be missing out, that we might lose our standing in the eyes of other people, not that we might be disobeying and ignoring God. It won’t do you any good in the long run. Just like those procrastinating Jews you end up “*planting much but harvesting little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in.*” Trying to please other people, trying to give them the honour that is really due to God himself, trying to go along with the influences of the world around is a mug’s game – it’s a waste of time and energy and resources if God is not right up at the top of your agenda.

Can you cope with having your “*spirit stirred*” by God? These people took the words of God through the prophet Haggai very seriously. They decided to obey what they had heard – and this wasn’t the first time: this was a reminder of what they should have been doing all along. And God came and stirred them up. That’s the scary bit, isn’t it? It’s a heck of a lot easier just to plod along doing what we’ve always been doing. We don’t want to show too much enthusiasm. We don’t want to be thought of as fanatical. Enthusiastic people usually have some kind of flaw in their doctrine, anyway! Let’s just keep on doing what we’ve always done: it keeps us happy and ensures that our precious lifestyle is pretty well protected. People who have their spirits stirred by God can be a bit embarrassing, too.

We are just too comfortable, really: let's make no bones about it. We've all got more or less everything we want. We can justify our routines and our lifestyles. Many of us have worked jolly hard to get where we are today and we're not about to give that all up. Oh, that God would stir our spirits, rekindle the fire, renew the enthusiasm, help us to climb out of the ruts, break out of the gilded cages. Oh, that we might get on and do what God has called us to do here in Lichfield.

And we don't need long meetings to try and discern what it is that God is calling us to do. Much of this is on a personal level anyway – and you don't need a meeting to sort that out. At our recent Elders' Awayday we were talking about revival and someone referred to the mention of the Welsh Revival in a sermon a couple of weeks back. Alan Weaver asked us if anyone knew where the revival had started and when we all tried to pronounce some Welsh place names, then gave up and shook our heads, he pointed to his heart. That's where God starts to work – in you, in me, in our hearts as we listen to a respond to his word. For many of us the call is to a deeper prayer life, a greater love for the Bible, a clearer witness in our homes and jobs and neighbourhoods. Out of that might come the greater projects, the renewals and revivals. It's so easy to hang on and on, waiting for the great plan to be made apparent, while our own Christian lives stagnate and atrophy. Come, Holy Spirit! Come and stir us up now, so that we no longer make excuses, so that we no longer put off doing things for God.

*“Give careful thought to your ways.”* Where are you going? What are your priorities – panelled houses or the House of God? Your own little plans or God's great plan? For many of us that will mean a great sea-change in our attitudes and our lifestyles. It may well be very uncomfortable for a while. But God has waited long enough while we have been saying *“The time is not yet come ..”* The time has come – time for you to think, to pray, to do. Time for you to answer the call of God and follow where he leads. Time for you to move forward into his purposes. Time for us all to build in this place a visible witness to the power and presence of the One True God.

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**To think about (and maybe discuss).**

- 1) How does God let us know what he wants us to do? How can we be sure it is God speaking to us?
- 2) Why is it so much easier to do the less important but apparently more urgent things? How do we decide what we really need to do – as individuals and as a church?
- 3) What do you think is the most important issue facing us as a church at the moment? What are we doing about it? What should we do about it?
- 4) What do you think is the most important issue facing you in your life at the moment? What are you doing about it?
- 5) Why might following God's way be uncomfortable? Do you have any personal stories to share?