

Haggai 1. 1-5. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 29 April 2012.

Our reading for this morning comes from the prophecy of Haggai, chapter 1. We shall read only the first five verses.

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: This people say, "The time has not come, the time for the house of the Lord to be built"'.¹

And the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 'Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?'

And now thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways'.

I intend to spend some of the time this morning painting in a little of the background to enable us to get our bearings, and then to 'consider' (a good 'Haggai' word) what the prophet has to say to us in the verses we have just read. God willing, we will complete the chapter next week.

As most will already know, the deporting of the nation of Judah to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar took place in three distinct stages – one in each of the reigns of the last three kings of Judah. First, he exiled King Jehoiakim (one of the sons of godly Josiah), together with some of the Jewish nobility, including Daniel. At that time, he also raided the temple at Jerusalem and took the sacred vessels back to Babylon with him. Second, he exiled King Jehoiachin (the son of Jehoiakim), together with 10,000 of the leading citizens, including Ezekiel. And third, following a horrific siege of 18 months, having blinded King Zedekiah, Judah's last earthly monarch, Nebuchadnezzar took him captive to Babylon, together with most of the city's remaining population. At that time, Nebuchadnezzar broke down the city walls and thoroughly burnt the Temple, the King's palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem.

But interestingly, just as there had been three phases to Judah's captivity, so, under God, there were three phases to Judah's return – the first under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (just possibly one and the same as Zerubbabel), when around 50,000 Jews returned.¹ The second wave (which comprised 1,700 men plus women and children) returned under the leadership of Ezra.² And the last company (numbering about 42,000) returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah almost 90 years after that under Sheshbazzar.

At the time, some may well have asked, 'Who cares about a postage-stamp size kingdom located in some political backwater of the great Persian Empire' – which, after all, is what the land of the nation of Judah was? 'Who could possibly have any interest in the people who had once lived there?' The breath-taking answer is that the God of heaven did! And for their sake He now moved both in history and international politics – 'stirring up the spirit' (as the language is) of Cyrus the Great³ to perform all His (God's) will⁴ – for, even though Cyrus had no personal, intimate knowledge of the Lord, he was the instrument the Lord used in the fulfilment of His own unfailing purpose.

I guess that King Cyrus of Persia must stand as a classic illustration of what Solomon had written long before: 'The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; He turns it like a stream of water wherever He will'.⁵

We know that Cyrus's conduct towards the Jews was in accordance with the general policy he adopted towards conquered nations. Instead of removing conquered peoples from their own lands, and filling their places with foreigners, as had his Babylonian and Assyrian predecessors, Cyrus encouraged their good will and allegiance by restoring them to their own countries and leaving them free to practise their own religion. In the case of heathen nations he returned the images of their gods. In the case of the Jews, he restored their sacred vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away, and underwrote whatever costs would be incurred when they rebuilt their Temple.

Not that such a development should have come as a surprise to God's people. For not only had the duration of their exile in Babylon been foretold by Jeremiah some 70 years before, but Cyrus had been named as their deliverer over 80 years before that.⁶

Without doubt, the last two Babylonian invasions were the worst, but the seventy year captivity predicted by Jeremiah dated from the first, extending from 606 to 536 B.C., when the returned exiles resettled in their homeland.⁷ And so, just as the first year of Nebuchadnezzar had marked the beginning of the captivity, the first year of Cyrus marked its end.

On their return, the restored exiles immediately set about rebuilding the temple and re-establishing the worship of Jehovah at Jerusalem. Their first step was to re-construct the altar on its ancient foundation, so that the God-ordained sacrificial system might be resumed, and the altar was both completed and dedicated in the same year they left Babylon – on the first day of the seventh month. And two weeks later, in accordance with the Law of God,⁸ they kept the Feast of Tabernacles – for which occasion ‘the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem’.⁹

Seven months later, the foundation of the Temple was laid, amidst great excitement, joy and tears.¹⁰

Ah but ... alas, soon after such a promising start, the work came to an abrupt halt. For the local Samaritan community took umbrage when the leaders of the Jews refused point blank to have anything to do with them and their proposal that they join them in the work – and some ‘unequal yoke’ that would have been! And immediately they (the Samaritans – labelled as ‘adversaries’ by Ezra) commenced a campaign of harassment – doing everything in their power to hinder the Jews. We read that they ‘weakened the hands of the people of Judah, troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them’.¹¹ And this opposition continued through and from the remainder of the reign of Cyrus right through until the second year of Darius. In all, the work of building the Temple was postponed for something like 15 years.¹²

That the work was ever resumed (and then completed in less than five years) was largely due, under God, to the prophesying of Haggai and his fellow prophet Zechariah.¹³

Clearly Haggai was an outstanding man. As far as the record goes, his total ministry spanned less than four months – in our terms, from the 29th of August to the 18th of December. And, remarkably, according to our chapter, in just over three weeks – with his messages of rebuke, exhortation, and encouragement – he converted the people from their lethargy and indifference into a highly motivated and vigorous workforce¹⁴ ... in just 23 days he succeeded, if I can put it this way, in ‘reviving a revival’¹⁵ – and this was well over a month before his fellow-worker Zechariah received his first – and very brief – message from the Lord.¹⁶

In the opening verse of our chapter, Haggai is very careful to specify (i) the exact date on which he received his first message, (ii) for whose benefit this message was received, and (iii) the authority with which it came. The message was received, he said, ‘In the second year of Darius the king’. Earlier prophets had been able to date their prophesying by reference to the reigns of the kings of Israel or Judah.¹⁷ But God’s nation no longer had a king of their own, and so Haggai (as later Zechariah) is compelled to date his message by reference to the name of a heathen monarch ... that of a man who had recently become the supreme ruler of the whole known world, reigning over the largest empire there had ever been – an area as wide as the continental United States. Oh yes, Darius was certainly an important man. But, like his grandson Artaxerxes, he was just that – a ‘man’.¹⁸ And I don’t need to remind you that there is a *higher* throne!

‘The first day of the month’ was distinguished from other days by the offering of additional sacrifices.¹⁹ And it may well be that the Lord deliberately chose such a time for Haggai to deliver his first message, because in all likelihood on that day most Jews would have been at the altar in Jerusalem.²⁰ If so, what better time to draw the people’s attention to the fact that, on account of their indolence, after 15 long years, God’s house still lay in ruins.

The prophet is equally precise in noting for whose benefit he spoke – as he does with each of his four addresses.²¹

And he is also careful to stipulate the source and origin of his authority. For it was, he says, ‘the word of the Lord’ which ‘came’, not so much here – as in the case of his last message – ‘to’ him, but ‘through’ him – that is, by his instrumentality. But although he (Haggai) was the agent – the human spokesman – ‘by whose hand’ (to use his own expression) the message came, ultimately it was God’s word, not his. Indeed, although his book is the second shortest in the Old Testament, after Obadiah, Haggai draws attention to the divine authority of his messages no less than 25 times.

But verse 1 is striking not only because of the details Haggai packs in – the exact date on which he received his first message, for whose benefit this message was received, and the authority which it carried – but on account of what Haggai the prophet doesn't include, namely, that he tells us nothing – and I mean nothing – about himself. For, unlike in the case of *most* of the other prophets, we are not even told his father's name. And we are given no clue either as to his tribe or his hometown.²² I can only conclude that to the good man, the Lord's message was of far greater importance than the Lord's messenger!²³

I suspect that when the Lord of hosts refers to 'this people' rather than to 'my people' (as He does almost 200 times elsewhere in scripture), He is already drawing attention to the fact that there was something seriously wrong in the relationship between Him and them.²⁴

'The time has not come', the Lord reports them as saying, 'the time for the house of the Lord to be built'. What did they mean, 'the time has not come'?

They could hardly have meant that they didn't have the time to do the work, for it was then 'the sixth month' – the arduous labour expended during the annual harvest season was now well and truly over.

Perhaps they had persuaded themselves that they had cause to be daunted on account of the opposition which they still encountered – maybe suggesting that it would be prudent to wait for a more propitious – a more favourable – opportunity to get on with the work. But, if that was so, they might wait for ever, for since when has any effective work for God escaped resistance of some kind or other?

Given that, when the Lord later responds through Haggai, He focuses entirely on economic issues, it may well be that it was the people's supposed lack of financial resources which carried the most weight in their minds – that, frankly, in their eyes, they just did not have the wherewithal to fund such an enterprise – that it lay well beyond their means.

And we know that, during the recent past, Cambyses (the son of Cyrus)²⁵ had waged a major (and successful) military campaign against Egypt. Indeed, from a historical point of view, his greatest achievement was to bring Egypt under Persian control. But it was inevitable that the constant movement of his forces through the land corridor of Judah would have made great demands on the local people in terms of food, water and shelter, and that this may have added to their other financial pressures – of which the Lord has much to say later in the chapter, and where, as we will see next week, God willing, He makes it clear that, far from them having been too poor to rebuild the Temple, their present poverty was His judgement on them because of their failure to do just that.²⁶

'No, now is definitely not the time', they may have convinced themselves, 'for us to undertake a large-scale building project – this will have to await an upturn in our economic situation!' And, in passing, it is wonderful to note that, when they did resume the work, and when the local authorities referred the matter to King Darius, having consulted the terms of Cyrus's original decree, in his reply he specifically required that all necessary expenses of the work be met immediately out of local taxes.²⁷ No doubt, the Lord's way of meeting any financial needs His people may have then been facing, What was that our Lord said about seeking first God's kingdom and all these things being added to you?²⁸

I referred just now to the people's 'supposed' lack of financial resources, and I did so because the Lord very swiftly disposed of any such 'excuse' for neglecting to rebuild the Temple – and, as He proved, 'excuse' was all it was. For He immediately turned back on them their own claim that it wasn't the right 'time' – pointing out that the truth was that it all came down to misplaced priorities. That it was all very simple – that 'you yourselves', as He put it – 'Yes, you are the people I mean' – that you are each concerned about a house. The problem is that it is the wrong house – the better off among you are each interested only in beautifying his own house and not in building mine!

Who knows? Perhaps some at least of the more well-to-do had panelled their own houses with wood from the very cedar trees purchased with the grant they had earlier been given by Cyrus for rebuilding the Lord's house!²⁹ For, as we discover later in our chapter, the people will now need to exert themselves and obtain fresh timber if they are to build the Temple.³⁰ And we should also note that some at least of the people lived in comfort – and even in luxury (for I note that a panelled residence was considered luxurious even for a king³¹) – while the house of God lay in a sorry state of disrepair.

And so, in a handful of words, the Lord unmasked the real issue – that they each had plenty of time for their own things but none for the things which were His. It would be difficult to miss the obvious New Testament counterpart ... ‘all seek their own things, not the things of Jesus Christ’.³² It has been well said: ‘It is an inevitable alternative that we must be occupied, either with the Lord's things, or with our own’.³³

How far removed these people were in heart from King David. You may recall his words to Nathan the prophet, ‘Behold now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent’.³⁴

David was concerned over the disparity between his lavish palace and the flimsy dwelling place for the ark of God. These people were unconcerned about the disparity between their lavish homes and the ruined condition of the House of God.

David sought to rectify the situation, but the Lord, through His prophet, had to tell him that the time had not come for him (David) to build a house for Him (the Lord). In sad contrast, the people of Haggai's day sought to defend their lethargy, but the Lord, through His prophet, has to tell them that the time had come - had long-since come – for them to build a house for Him!

These people needed to learn, in the words of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., that ‘The time is always right to do what is right’.

It was, the Lord of hosts said, the time for honest assessment and self-examination ... ‘Consider your ways’ – ‘put your heart on your ways’, literally. And this word ‘consider’ – to give careful thought to – is something of a favourite with the prophet – using it, as he does, no less than five times in his short book.³⁵

But the Lord would exhort you and me this morning, not only – as He may be doing – to ‘consider our ways’, but – with my eye still on the bread and wine – ‘to consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you grow weary and lose heart’.³⁶

God willing, at the outset next week we will see that Haggai next gives five examples of the way in which all the people's best efforts utterly failed to meet their needs or give them satisfaction, and this because the difficulties they were experiencing were the direct result of the Lord's discipline on them on account of their misplaced priorities.

And it is on that note we must leave it for today, with the Lord's word through Haggai to us raising the all-important issue – not of buildings – but of our priorities in life ... facing us with the challenge (no less than he did the men of Haggai's day) whether our priorities are in line with His. Because if they are, those priorities will affect every department of our lives – our conduct, our speech, our bankbooks, our work-life, our leisure ... in a nutshell, all we do and how we do it.

Footnotes

¹ Ezra 2. 64-65.

² Ezra 8. 1-14.

³ Ezra 1. 1-3.

⁴ Isa. 44. 28.

⁵ Prov. 21. 1.

⁶ Hezekiah died in 686 BC. See Isa. 1. 1.

⁷ <http://www.johnpratt.com/items/docs/captivity.html>

⁸ Lev. 23. 34.

⁹ Ezra 3. 1-6.

¹⁰ Ezra 3. 8-13.

¹¹ Ezra 4. 1-5.

¹² Ezra 4. 1-5, 24.

¹³ Ezra 5. 1-2; 6. 15.

¹⁴ Haggai 1. 2, 14-15.

¹⁵ 'Reviving a revival', A E Phillips, Malaysia.

¹⁶ After the first two months of his preaching, Zechariah, was raised up to carry on his message; yet after one brief prophecy was again silent, until Haggai had ended the words which God gave him. Cf. 1 Cor. 14. 30.

¹⁷ For example, Isa. 1. 1; Jer. 1. 2-3; Ezek. 1. 2; Dan. 1. 1; Amos 1. 1.

¹⁸ Neh. 1. 11.

¹⁹ Num. 28. 11-15.

²⁰ Ezra 3. 1.

²¹ Haggai 1. 1-15; 2. 1-9; 2. 10-19; 2. 20-23.

²² See, for example, Amos 1. 1; Micah 1. 1; Nahum 1. 1.

²³ Hag 1. 13.

²⁴ See Isa. 8. 6.

²⁵ Cambyses, son of Cyrus, was noted particularly for his conquest of Egypt but left a negative legacy of mismanagement that left the Empire in a near shambles. His mysterious death was followed by an attempted usurpation of the Persian throne by Gaumata, an official who claimed to be a brother of Cambyses hitherto thought to be dead. Before Gaumata could seize control he was assassinated by Darius Hystaspes and some collaborators, and Darius placed himself in power on September 29, 522.

²⁶ Haggai 1. 9-11.

²⁷ Ezra 6. 8.

²⁸ Matt. 6. 33.

²⁹ Ezra 3. 7.

³⁰ Haggai 1. 8.

³¹ 1 Kings 7. 3, 7; Jer. 22. 14.

³² Phil. 2. 21.

³³ William Kelly. (Lectures on the Minor Prophets.)

³⁴ 2 Sam. 7. 2.

³⁵ Haggai 1. 5, 7; 2. 15, 18(2).

³⁶ Heb. 12. 3.