

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

November 10th 2019

Haggai 1:15b - 2:9 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17

Luke 20: 27-38 Psalm 145: 1-5, 18-22

MY KEY THEMES

- New situations and new questions call for new responses
- Taking everything about the spiritual life 'literally' may actually kill it and make it unbelievable
- To build a new 'Temple' we have to let the old one fall down first

So, the exiles have returned. If, like me, you had to look in the index or in a commentary to find out about Haggai, you'll have seen that this is one of the books of the OT with the most cross-referencing to other known events. Hence all the virtually unpronounceable names! But the scholars can tell us with some degree of certainty, that the year is 520BCE, some eighteen years after the exile ended. If Haggai was alive before the exile, (and that's less clear), these are the sermons of a man getting on for 70 who desperately wanted the people of his time to find a new way of serving their changing understanding of God, focused around renewal, not just of their religious life, but of their whole nation. There, I assure you, the similarities end!

The back story is in the Book of Ezra. It's well worth reading the first few chapters to appreciate the context. They'd made a start on renewing their nation's spiritual life, but rebuilding the Temple had stalled, largely, it seems, because of disputes between the returners and those who had been left behind. Perhaps we should call them Leavers and Remainers! Be brave! Be bold! says the prophet. Because what comes out of this project will, in the end, be more glorious than what was there before. Don't just look back. And for once, they listened! As the Psalmist also says, hopefully each generation passes on what is best of their faith experience to the next. But each then has to determine what God now means to them and get on with making a *new* thing; hopefully a better thing than what was there before. Keeping things the same is not an option.

By the time Luke was writing, the rebuilt Temple had been destroyed yet again. Nothing lasts forever. The Sadducees with whom it seems Jesus was disputing, (and who Paul also argued with – see Acts 23: 6-10), were trying to restrict thinking to the Law of Moses only. ‘This is what it says in our ‘Bible’; if it’s not there, it can’t be added’. So they tried to argue their case with a trick question about the resurrection of the dead. Seven dead brothers left behind a somewhat unlucky seven-times bereaved widow. They asked Jesus to sort out whose wife she would be in heaven. Jesus says you can’t talk of heaven in that literal way or it becomes a nonsense. Human conventions like marriage can’t simply be transferred into a dimension beyond our knowing. All human concepts are just that - ours - even ‘religious’ ones.

So can we realistically say anything about heaven or anything else beyond our human experience? Christian orthodoxy seems to suggest that we *do* know what it will be like, and even who will be there (and who won’t)! Are Jesus, (and Luke, writing after Paul), counselling caution before making any such claim? Perhaps we should doubt Paul’s confidence in what is to come, not least because he was clearly wrong about the timing. It didn’t all end as he expected. He would be very surprised, and perhaps not a little disappointed, to find us all still here.

It may seem odd to be talking about resurrection so close to Christmas. Or for me to suggest that the Sadducees were wrong to dispute the idea of a life after death, given that I don’t believe in it either. Clearly it was a strong feature of life in the Early Church because, as the faithful were dying, and Jesus had not returned as expected, they wanted to hold on to a hope that, as someone I know says in virtually every sermon, ‘The best is yet to come’. I’ve written before that I entirely understand that wish and hope for such a future, even though I don’t personally share it. For many it is enough to sustain them through a pretty awful present.

But I want to link Haggai’s call for renewal and Jesus’ response to the Sadducees to ask a broader question. Do the new truths that we discover as new situations arise, always have to be ‘literally’ true just because that is what was thought before? Jesus seems to be saying that taking the idea of resurrection ‘literally’, renders it meaningless. Who indeed would the poor exhausted widow be married to? It’s a hypothetical question so it can only ever have a hypothetical answer. Maybe much conventional doctrine makes the same mistake. So could approaching matters of faith in a less literal way mean that more people will come to see its value?

It is often said that we now live in a 'post-Christian' culture. I'm not sure that's quite the case – much of Christianity is still embedded in our way of life even if not everyone recognises it as such. But we certainly live in a 'post-Christendom' culture where the Church and its world-view no longer have the influence they did. This is nowhere more obvious than in what people now believe to be 'true'. Modern thinking people simply do not believe that virgins give birth after being impregnated by a God, literally. That dead men walk out of tombs or in a God who lives above the sky where he keeps a constant eye on you, literally. They know that dead bodies once cremated or left in the ground cannot possibly be 'raised', literally. And so on. Are people of faith in danger of holding on so fast to the past that they, like the people of Haggai's time, fail to build for the future? New times need new ideas. We need to focus on the real questions that real people are actually asking. Maybe that's a much more hopeful way forward than always trying to reinforce the answers of previous generations. They don't necessarily address the questions that anyone is asking anymore, no matter how important they may seem to us.

What are the questions that people out there are now asking, especially younger people? 'How do we save the planet?' is probably number one at the moment. 'What hope is there for the world?' 'How can we live healthy lives, mentally and physically?' 'How can we cope with loss and disappointments?' 'How do I find love and fulfilment, whatever my sexual orientation or gender?' 'How do we make the world a more just, peaceful and safer place?' 'What can we do that will ever make any real difference'?

People of faith may argue that their God is the solution to all these issues, but a God is not what others are looking for. Or they may be told 'it's all in the Bible'. But traditional Christian answers don't necessarily work, because becoming a Christian doesn't resolve all these problems or address these new questions. The quest for personal immortality or 'salvation' is nothing like as high on people's agenda as the search for a satisfying and fulfilled life this side of death. That's where we need to have some good news to share. So what are the people of faith to do? Despair at the lack of interest around them, or get on with building a new 'Temple', much more glorious than the one that went before? That old one lies in ruins around us. It's been knocked down or turned into offices or a carpet warehouse. In some cases, but not all, that's a sad loss. But more closures will inevitably follow unless we do something genuinely new. Our old truths are dead, no matter how precious they may have been in the past. Taken 'literally' they simply make no sense any more.

We need a new, much more poetic and imaginative approach. We have to recognise that much of the Bible is story, metaphor and myth, not 'facts' and biography. What made sense in the C4thCE doesn't make sense now because of Darwin, science and a whole world of knowledge that we have discovered since. So, be bold! Make something new, and better than before. God is God of the living, or if you want to put it another way, the search for deeper truths about ourselves doesn't stop with the past. Ask a different question and so find a different answer that fits with current experience, not one based on assumptions that actually stop us finding something more creative instead. That was what Haggai said had to be done. Maybe doing things differently could just lead to a renewal of interest in Jesus and his self-giving Way. Maybe the best *is* yet to come, if not quite in the sense that my friend means it!

KEY QUOTE

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FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- What is the 'good news' about Jesus if it is NOT just about your own personal salvation? Why should anyone today bother with him, or with his followers?
- What Christian truth doesn't necessarily have to be taken 'literally' but still has a deeper truth within it? e.g. creation, incarnation, resurrection, or the Bible itself?
- If you were building a new Church (a building or a community), what would it look like? Why?