

## *The abiding of the Spirit in us, the glory of the Church*

St Philip's Anglican Church., O'Connor

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### *Haggai 2.1-9*

Haggai is one of the last of the prophets of Israel in scripture. Only two chapters long, the book comes up in the lectionary just once every three years, with today's passage. An 1886 sermon on the same passage by the famous Charles Spurgeon ran to 7,240 words. That's a good hour-or-more's worth. I don't need quite that long, but I do like Spurgeon's title: *The abiding of the Spirit, the glory of the Church*.

The text helps us date Haggai's words to 520 BCE—eighteen years after the earliest return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. The Persians who had overthrown the Babylonian empire had allowed the people of Judea to return to their homeland and the worship of their God. But the Judean province was small and not wealthy.

Haggai's message is about rebuilding the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians—Solomon's temple. The book begins with Haggai berating the community for neglecting the work on the temple—God's house—even though they had built their own houses.

“Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while God's house lies in ruins?” Haggai says. “Consider how you have fared,” Haggai declares that God has brought drought and poverty because God's house lay in ruins, “while all of you hurry off to your own houses”.

Chapter one tell us that leaders of the tiny nation—Zerubbabel the Governor and Joshua the High Priest—obeyed Haggai's exhortations and led the people in getting on with the building work. So much so that Haggai was able to prophesy that God was with them and the people. Today's reading—at the beginning of chapter two—is set just twenty-one days later.

After a short burst of enthusiasm, some of the people were becoming discouraged because the older ones could remember Solomon's magnificent temple and knew that this new temple could never be as glorious. Haggai sums it up by asking, “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?”

There's a similar story in Ezra chapter 3, from sixteen years earlier when the work of temple rebuilding had first begun. Many of the leaders wept loudly then, when the foundations of the second temple were laid, because they had seen glory of the former temple, on which Solomon had lavished the finest rich materials and craftsmanship.

Yet there were powerful prophecies in Ezekiel, Isaiah and elsewhere about the coming of God to make Zion the centre of a kingdom of righteousness and peace. In Amos (ch. 9), God promised to restore the fortunes of God's people, that they would rebuild and inhabit the ruined cities, plant gardens and vineyards and enjoy the fruit and wine.

Meanwhile, in Haggai's day, conditions were tough and it was hard for the people to believe that such prophecies could ever be fulfilled. But Haggai prophesied, “take courage ... all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you ... My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” God had promised restoration—that the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt. And when God restores the result is better than before. How could this second

temple, apparently much less grand than Solomon's, be a fulfilment of the prophecies and the hope of the people? Haggai's prophecy in chapter 2 continues:

My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour ... The silver is mine, and the gold is mine. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former ... and in this place I will give prosperity.

The gold is God's. The silver is God's. God was the one who would ensure a glorious future for the temple and its prosperity. The language is that of power, sovereignty and creation. God will make the house splendid. Many scholars believe that the coming of "the treasure of all nations" refers to the coming of the Messiah.

"I will fill this house with splendour," says the Lord of Hosts. That is, God's own self, God's presence, God's spirit, would be the splendour that filled the house and made it glorious. That's why the psalmist could say,

*How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;  
Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.  
For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. (Ps 84)*

And in Psalm 24:

*One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.*

In the disappointment of some of them, the Judean people were thinking of the material and symbolic glory of the temple, its glorious architecture and furnishings.

God's emphasis on the temple, spoken through the prophet, was not for its material glory, or for the privilege and power of the priests, or for any sense of security it might give. The entire point and purpose of the Temple and its worship was the presence of God. Otherwise, beautiful or not, the temple would have been a lie—no different from the equally magnificent temples dedicated to heathen idols in other lands.

It wasn't as if the temple was unimportant—after all, God had commanded the people to get on with building it. But *why* it was important was because of its place in God's relationship with God's people. This very temple building—much changed and enlarged by Herod—would later be the one that Jesus visited and cleansed of the money changers and those who had forgotten that it was to be a house of prayer.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (3: 16-17) reminds us that we ourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in us ... "God's temple is sacred," Paul says, "and you are that temple." In second Corinthians (6.16-18) we are again told that, "we are the temple of the living God." God's household, Ephesians (2.19-22) says, is founded on Christ in whom "the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord... . And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Haggai helped the people understand that God was present to empower them, encourage them and give them true peace. God used the small resources of the Judeans and their hard work to make something extraordinary—a place that was glorious because it was a place

where God could be found, a place where God was pleased to dwell, where the very presence and glory of God would be known.

God has promised to dwell in our community—the church. And it's God who makes building our community possible. Thus Ephesians proclaims (chapter 3):

... to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.

To him be glory in the church.” That's us, you and me.

The Psalmist asked the Lord that he might live in the house of the Lord all the days of his life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple. That temple is wherever God's people are. To live in the house of the Lord is to be alone with God or in the company of God's people in prayer, worship, work and fellowship.

The Holy Spirit is given to us to be even more extraordinary and glorious than the ancient temple—a people who are glorious because among us and in each of us is where God is found, where God dwells, and where the very presence and glory of God is revealed.

*The abiding of the Spirit—in us—the glory of the Church.*