

I will build my Church – Rachel Johnson

Haggai 2:1-9, John 2:13-22

As we heard from Jonathan last week, after 70 years the exiles were home – some of them, anyway, others decided to stay in Babylon. But for those who chose to return it was a dream come true – back to the promised land, back where they belonged. Dreams can turn sour though – Israel wasn't quite what it was in the golden age of David and Solomon. Homes needed rebuilding, fields needed ploughing, grapes needed harvesting. After all, the people needed to live, didn't they? But things didn't go well, drought fell on the land and Haggai told them why: *This is what the Lord Almighty says. **My house, my temple, remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house.***

The people listened and they responded. They began work on the temple. They put their best efforts into it but the result was – well – not quite what they'd dreamt of. I'm sure you've had similar experiences; glossy holiday brochures, say, that promise a sea view but deliver a room looking out onto a brick wall. Or birthday cakes – and I have form here - I've attempted cats, castles, a snare drum, a giant blueberry muffin – and the results are usually edible but they rarely match up to the picture in my head. So the new temple did the job, it gave them a place of worship, but if you'd grown up with stories about the magnificence of Solomon's Temple then the structure they managed to build must have looked like nothing at all. Can you imagine how downcast must they have felt? Into this despondent atmosphere came another message from Haggai.

Be strong, declares the Lord, be strong, all you people of the land, be strong and work, for I am with you. It's an echo of the Lord's message to Joshua – be strong and courageous...and I myself will be with you.

Then he says '***This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt'*** – when of course the Lord didn't have any kind of temple, only a tabernacle. But here, I think, is the heart of this message of encouragement – the covenant. God promised that he would be their God and make them a light to all nations. And God keeps his promises.

See how the message carries on: I will shake all nations. I will fill this house with glory. The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house declares the Lord Almighty.

It's an astonishing promise, isn't it? Almost unbelievable. But Haggai showed them that they could trust the promise because it was the Lord Almighty who had made it and he would fulfil it. He didn't need a magnificent temple but he did require that the Israelites keep their side of the covenant – to put God first. If they did that, the Lord would do the rest. And over the centuries the temple was

improved and renovated, ending with the 46 year long renovation carried out by Herod. Finally, the Israelites had a temple to be proud of.

But what does this have to do with us? This is a promise to the Israelites at a specific time in their history. Can we just pick it up and claim it for ourselves as we look to rebuild the church post-pandemic? Let's think about that in the light of our gospel reading.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the Temple courts he drove out the sheep and cattle and overturned the tables of the money changers.

The Israelites might have been proud of the newly refurbished temple but Jesus wasn't. It had become a place of commerce, a place of collusion with the Romans, a place of exclusion – if you were poor or gentile or female. But the key point of this story is what Jesus says next:

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.

Jesus was claiming he was the new temple, that he was God's dwelling place, that God's glory - the tangible, visible presence of God - was fully revealed in him.

The Romans destroyed the second temple in AD70. But they couldn't destroy Jesus. Jesus is the temple that will endure to the very end of the age, fulfilling God's covenant promises. And since Jesus ascended to heaven he's represented on earth by the Church. Paul writes to the Corinthian church, '***you yourselves are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in your midst (1 Co 3:16)***'. And Jesus promised to Peter, '***the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matt 16:18)***'. That's how God's promise to Israel also applies to us: The glory of God revealed in Jesus and embodied by the Church is greater than any temple could ever be, and that glory will never be overcome.

Perhaps you look back at days gone by, when ladies wore hats to church and the pews were full and there were four Sunday School classes. And you might feel, like the Israelites, this present church looks like nothing. We rattle around in draughty buildings with leaky roofs whilst outside our friends and neighbours are shopping or washing the car or playing football. Over the last 18 months we've lost so many of the connection points we had with the community – Refresh Café, Sparks and TOTS, CAMEO, Open the Book, weddings, BBQs. We've been separated from each other. Some of our number have passed away or drifted away. How can we possibly rebuild? But Haggai's words reach down to us through the centuries, reminding us, '***I am with you, do not fear, I will fill this house with glory.***' God is the builder. If we're faithful to him then he will rebuild us.

The Israelites rebuilt the temple with wood and stones. But the church is built of people. What does rebuilding look like for us? Paul reminds us of the starting point: ***no one can lay any***

foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). Our life together is founded in Jesus Christ who died to make us one with him. So rebuilding the church must start with each of us continually turning to Jesus, trusting Jesus in the ups and downs of daily life.

Paul's letters also speak of building up the church:

1 Cor 14:12 - Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

Eph 4:16 - From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

For Paul, building up the church is about using our gifts to build up each other in love. And I think this is so important. Before we rush to restart lots of activities we need to rebuild our fellowship. We need to rediscover what it means to be the body of Christ as we're able to gather together again. Every single one of us has a part to play in this fellowship, every single one of us can do something to build up another person, every single one of us needs the gifts that others can offer. If Jesus is the foundation then the next layer of stones is made by each of us looking at the person sitting next to us and listening to their story, laughing and weeping alongside them, offering a cup of tea, giving a word of encouragement and prayer, learning to disagree well, washing their feet. Loving each other as Christ loves us.

Does that seem a bit inward looking when the church is meant to be outward looking and missional? Perhaps it does. But the temple was meant to reveal the glory of God's presence and if we're to reveal God's presence in the world then we need to start with ourselves. Listen to Jesus:

John 13:35 – Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 17:22 - I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one...then the world will know that you sent me.

Our love and our unity bear witness to Jesus and let God's glory shine out. As we build up each other God will continue to build – a neighbour who needs help in the garden, a colleague who needs a listening ear, a teen who needs someone to believe in them, a friend who's ready to hear good news. The new church might not look like the old one, it might look scruffy and frail, it might look like nothing. But the Lord is the builder. And the Lord says, *'be strong, all you people, be strong and work together and build each other up and love each other, for I am with you and I will fill this house with glory'*.