

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 10th November, 2019 (Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: Setting our priorities by God

I want to spend some time today talking with you about our first reading, from the Old Testament book of Haggai. Haggai is the third last book of the OT, and it's not one we hear from often. The setting of this book is an interesting one. The Israelites have begun to trickle back to Jerusalem after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon in 539BC. Returning home, after years of exile in Babylon, they have found their fields neglected and their houses in ruins. The old men, remembering the beauty of Solomon's temple, weep when the foundation of the new one is laid. It is so small in comparison, so simple, so ordinary. But even that somewhat meagre effort at rebuilding the temple soon gets put on hold. Hardly surprising, we might think. Anxious over poor crops and poor wages, the Israelites put rebuilding the temple on indefinite hold in order that they might make a better living for themselves. And on many levels, this seems like a reasonable, even responsible thing to do.

But the prophet Haggai extols the people to put "first things first". His is a radically different view. He says life is hard because people are not rebuilding the temple, are not, in other words, getting their priorities right. In God's eyes, rebuilding the temple

is the priority, and though it might defy the principles of sound human reasoning, now, Haggai says, is precisely the right time to get this project finished.

Rebuilding temples seems rather a long way from our modern, 21st century priorities. Yet the underlying message remains. If we scrutinise the reasonings and priorities in our own lives, right here and now, what do we uncover? Do I prioritise what God wants me to do today? Right now? Or do I let a whole bagful of personal goals and activities have precedence? Some of these goals may be frivolous, some may be reasonable and responsible. But to the extent that they are my plans and projects rather than God's plans and projects, I, like the Israelites in 520 BC, am putting God off, putting God on hold.

Haggai reminds us of the importance of putting God first in everything. Remember the first and great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Not with a bit of our heart left over after all the worldly priorities have been checked off. Not with just a part of our soul when we feel like it. Not with our mind when we can be bothered to disentangle it from all the multitude of attractive distractions available in this modern-day world. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Haggai also asks the Israelites to reflect on how things are turning out for them with their current priorities. “Consider how you have fared” he says. “You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes”. Sounds all too familiar, doesn't it? The pulls of the world on our hearts, our souls, our minds, are great but more often than not, if we neglect the rightful first call on them, of God, so often we are left discontented, strangely empty, feeling there ought to be more, searching for something, the elusive heart's desire that can only be met by God.

Haggai reminds the Israelites, and us, that God is in charge. Our first priority is to honour God, to live our lives by God's commands - not by the priorities we set ourselves, according to what seems most pleasant, or even most reasonable and responsible to us. In the book of Haggai, God calls on the people to take courage, because this radical way of life that prioritises God, indeed does take courage. But it is a courage born of the safety and security of this all-caring God who surrounds his people with infinite love. God says: "take courage ... for I am with you ... my spirit abides among you; do not fear ... [for] 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 ... and in this place I will give prosperity."

I think there are important messages here not just for each and every one of us as individuals, but for us as a community of faith, and indeed for all communities of faith. Haggai is a very brief OT book, but the message is big indeed. How often do we say... "Not now Lord, right now I have to find time for this job, or that activity, or I need to finish cleaning the car, or do the shopping, or whatever"? How often do we prioritise reading our emails, or scanning FB, or doing any other of the endless tasks available to us instead of finding time for prayer, or reading Scripture, or discerning the will of God in our lives?

We have to allow ourselves time to be with God, to listen to God, otherwise how are we ever to know what God's priorities for us are? Discerning God's will in our lives isn't always easy, but it is what God asks of us. We thank God for Haggai's reminder of this to us all today, and we ask God for the strength and the courage to set ourselves afresh to this task, both as individuals and in community.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.