
Hag 1:15b—2:9; Ps 145:1-5, 18-22 or Ps 98;
2 Th 2:1-5, 13-17; Lk 20:27-38.

Unto God be the glory,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The fool asks in his heart:
‘Why were the old days
better than these?’
(Ecc1 7.10)

A characteristically
caustic observation
from the book of Ecclesiastes.

As we heard
in this morning’s 1st lesson,
the prophet Haggai’s
contemporaries
are guilty of just such folly –
comparing themselves
unfavourably
with an idealised past.

*

The euphoria
that had accompanied
their return from exile
in Babylon,
has given way
to disillusionment.

They’d begun with
an energetic program
of restoration –
rebuilding their homes
in splendid fashion.

But...,
the Lord’s temple
remained in ruins.

Haggai’s first oracle,
which we didn’t read,
is the Lord’s rebuke
of their self-interest.

*

To give them their due,
they listened
and acted –
building the new temple.

But, now,
as I say,
disillusionment has set in.

Recall the Lord's questions.

*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?*
(Hag 2.3)

Given that Israel
had been in exile
for 70 years,
there must have been
precious few still alive
who'd seen the first temple –
and that –
when they were
but children.

Childhood memories
are exactly
the fruitful soil
for magnifying past wonders?

Most of Haggai's contemporaries
had only the accounts
of their parents
and grandparents –
no doubt embossed,
in the telling
and retelling,
into something
of almost
mythic proportions.

By comparison:
the new temple... –
the prophet asks –

*...is it not
in your sight
as nothing?*
(Hag 2.3)

'Twas ever thus!

How many times
have I heard parishioners
talk of the good old days –
when we'd 500 children
in our Sunday school,
packed churches,
and the like.

Yes, in Canada
and the States
it was that way
for 15 or 20 years
after the Second War.

And I think
many people believe
that for most of
the Church's history
things were pretty good –
at least by comparison
with today in Canada.

Two errors lie hidden here.

First, ignorance of history.

Growth,
packed churches,
and overflowing coffers,
are the exception,
not the rule.

*

But...,
more insidious
is the second error –
namely, measuring success
by worldly criteria:

- healthy budgets,
- bums in pews,
- bigger, is better.

Back to Haggai.

The Lord contradicts
his people's disillusion.

He contradicts it
with a splendid promise.

*...take courage,
all you people of the land...
for I am with you...
according to the promise
that I made you
when you came out of Egypt.*

*My spirit
abides among you;
do not fear.*

*...I will fill this house
with splendour....*

*The latter splendour
of this house
shall be greater
than the former...*

*and in this place
I will give prosperity,
says the Lord of hosts.*

(Hag 2.4-5, 7, 9)

Not the disillusioned
folly of nostalgia,
but a courageous confidence
in the faithfulness
of their gracious God
is to define them,
inform them,...
and sustain them
in a corresponding faithfulness.

The 20th Century
German pastor and theologian,
Dietrich Bonhoeffer –
executed by direct order
of Adolph Hitler
just weeks before
the end of the war –

served most of his ministry
during the 1930's and 40's,
when so many
of his contemporaries
were variously compromising
with the nazification
of Germany.

He,
and those with him –
by virtue of their
determined resistance –
found themselves –
- their living conditions,
- their financial support,
- their scope for ministry –
increasingly limited.

All the more
remarkable, therefore,
is Bonhoeffer's persistent
exhortation to thanksgiving
(and I quote):

"If we do not
give thanks daily
for the Christian community
in which we have
been placed,
even when there are
no great experiences,
no noticeable riches,
but much weakness,
difficulty,
and little faith –

and if, on the contrary,
we only keep
complaining to God
that everything is
so miserable,
and so insignificant,
and does not at all
live up to our
expectations –

then we hinder God
from letting our
community grow
according to the measure
and riches
that are there for us all
in Jesus Christ....

“Only God knows
the real condition
of ... our [church] community....
“What may appear weak
and insignificant to us
may be great and glorious to God....
“The more thankfully
we daily receive
what is given to us,
the more assuredly
and consistently
will our [church] ...
increase and grow
from day to day
as God pleases”
(end quote).
(*Bonhoeffer Reader* 522f.)

Where are you?

Where am I?

Are we with Haggai’s
grumbling complainers,
- foolishly nostalgic
for the good old days,
- resorting, in unbelief,
to the world’s
criteria of success?

Or, are we with Bonhoeffer
and his little band?

Are we grateful
in spite of ourselves –
in spite of “much weakness,
difficulty,
and little faith” –
trusting that,
“what may appear weak
and insignificant to us,
may be great
and glorious
to God”.

So it is –
the Lord assures his people –
in ancient Israel,
in contemporary Oakville –
through his prophet, Haggai:

*My spirit
abides among you;
do not fear.*
(Hag 2.5)

I give the last word
to St Paul
in today's epistle.

*Now, may our Lord
Jesus Christ himself
and God our Father,
who loved us
and, through grace,
gave us eternal comfort
and good hope,
comfort our hearts
and strengthen them
in every good work
and word.*
(2 Thess 2.16f.)

Amen.