

Looking Forward - Reflection

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

I am sure that when I start talking about the context of a biblical book, by now you expect me to say something along the lines of "we don't really know who wrote it, and the when is a bit dodgy, we have an idea to whom it was written, but that depends on the when and these are the theories..." Haggai is different. In short, we know it was written (or at least preached) in the second half of the year 520BCE. We can be even more specific about today's reading – 17th October 520BCE is the date.

17th October, 520BCE was the Festival of Booths. It had come to celebrate two momentous events in the life of the ancient Jewish community. Originally, this was a time to remember the Exodus, the living in tents while escaping from slavery to their new life in the Promised Land. It coincided with the autumn harvest festival.

However, the Festival of Booths also celebrated the dedication of the Temple by Solomon. The Temple was the biggest building in the city, both in terms of area of buildings as well as the size. Constructed on a hill, it stood where everyone could see it. The temple stood as an imposing reminder of the monarchy and Yahweh, inviting the people to come up and be part of this community.

In 520BCE – the second year of King Darius – the prophet who calls himself "Haggai" (from the Hebrew root that means "to make a pilgrimage") reflects on the people struggling. They had returned home with great hopes in 538BCE. Memory and stories had put rose-coloured glasses on the people who returned. Despite the long years of deprivation and warfare that preceded the Exile, Jerusalem was remembered as a wonderful place, the Temple as glittering, and nostalgia reigned supreme. No wonder the people were disheartened.

Here they come to a time when they celebrated the dedication of that old temple, and it is yet another reminder of everything they had lost. Years before they had asked "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Now they are asking "how can we worship Yahweh in a place that looks like this?"

It's a bit of a rhetorical question that gets asked: who remembers. The answer is, of course, no one. The Exile had happened almost 70 years before these events. In ancient times a long-lived person reached 70. So, even if there had been people born before the Exile who were still alive, they would have been very small children at the time and now considered far too old for such a journey. There was quite simply no one who remembered the former splendour – it was all about the stories they had been told through the generations.

We all know what happens to stories, don't we. Stories get developed, the truth expands, they change in subtle little ways, not because of an intention to lie, but rather to make a particular point. I wonder what the point was that was being made...

And so, as the people looked at what they had now, and reflected on the stories of what had been, there was despondence, frustration, and perhaps a sense of "why bother."

They had tried so hard. For 18 years they had been rebuilding the city, including homes and the Temple, but it was nothing compared to those stories from before the Exile.

Isn't it so disheartening when we compare what we had now to the memories that are tinted with such a difference in time? And that perspective fails to think about the changes that have happened and why; it also forgets the positives that have happened because of those changes and simply focuses on what we have lost.

Haggai reinterprets the tradition of the Festival of the Booths. He uses that tradition to remind the people of the covenant – Yahweh's promise to be with them – and that the trappings of the amazing temple is not important. What is important is the relationship the people have with Yahweh.

I wonder, if Haggai was writing to us today, what are the rose-coloured glasses he would be telling us to remove? What tradition might he reinterpret to encourage us to look forwards rather than backwards?