

God is with us in challenging times – and always has been

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Pentecost + 22 C: Remembrance Sunday – Haggai 2, Luke 20

Haggai 2.4b take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, 5 according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

Kids: An introduction to Puddleglum. My can't-do attitude.

Today we remember that war is a terrible thing. Today's passages from Haggai and Luke help us realise that God is with us in challenging times – and always has been. Both books were written by people faced with a most daunting challenge to rebuild their culture and themselves. Each passage was shaped by war; two disastrous wars more than five centuries apart. Each war saw the Temple of Jerusalem destroyed.

Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians who carried Jerusalem's elite into exile. Now Haggai encourages their descendants – the returned exiles to get on with the job of re-building that temple. After it was finally rebuilt by Herod the Great, it became the power base of a wealthy group of religious leaders called the Sadducees. In today's Gospel, Luke remembers the Sadducees taunting Jesus about the resurrection of the dead; something they didn't believe in.

By the time Luke's gospel was being written down, the Second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Knowing this gives the Sadducees' opposition to Jesus' teaching about resurrection a bitter poignancy. As Luke wrote this Gospel, it

was the Sadducees themselves who were in the most desperate need of resurrection. Their power base and their identity disappeared when the Temple was destroyed.

But let's turn back to a time a little bit earlier than Haggai. Ezra 3 tells us the story of the laying of the foundations of the new temple. Some who were present for that ceremony were old enough to have known Solomon's temple, and they were adamant that no re-build could be as good as the old one. (Proto-Anglicans?)

It seems that their can't-do attitude prevailed, and work stopped for some time. Today's reading from Haggai parachutes us into the story seventeen years after Ezra. Now God calls Haggai to stir the people up to resume rebuilding. We just heard him trying to convince them not to worry about the gold and silver and all the ornaments that people remembered. They should just get building with what they have and God will provide the rest. As Haggai put it, 4...take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts.

"Take courage" A lot depends on the way people choose to see things, doesn't it. When the Israelites found themselves facing Goliath, most of them thought, 'He's too big to kill!' But David thought, 'He's too big to miss!' David's positive attitude – coming from his faith in God – made all the difference. Haggai's way of encouraging people to trust God was to get them to remember how God had been faithful to them in the past: 4btake courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, 5according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

What promise did God make to Moses? In Exodus 3:12, God said, simply, I will be with you. Apart from that promise, Moses had no hope. He had no army to force the issue; no money to buy the people's freedom. He only had one thing; God's promise to

be with them. That promise was all he needed. God makes this same promise, through Haggai – My spirit abides among you; do not fear. God called discouraged people to build what they never believed they could. Work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts. And they did. And the rebuilt Second Temple would end up to be the equal any of the great buildings of antiquity.

Through the Gospels, Jesus calls discouraged people to build too. But not to build with stone and mortar. Jesus calls us to build new community, and our materials are people, faith, hope and love – and, like Haggai got the people of his time to do – to base our confidence on God's track record of faithfully being present with us.

Over the centuries, where people of faith have been tempted to despair, when we've opened ourselves to God, the Holy Spirit has always come and brought renewal. This has never ceased. In parts of the world where people have nothing but faith, hope and love as building materials for their Church, it's thriving; growing at an astonishing pace. The greater the obstacles, it seems, the faster the growth. Sadly, we're a bit challenged for this kind of faith because of our comfort and prosperity.

So where does that impetus come from? Can even a pessimistic, or complacent people find the enthusiasm to build for a future which seems beyond them right now? I wonder this because Bp Denise last week, and the Archbishop a few weeks earlier challenged us to develop a Mission Action Plan – to prayerfully look at the world around us and listen to the Spirit. What is God up to that we might join in on? – and again prayerfully together, to work out how we might do it.

We may not be pessimistic. We might be complacent though – we might be pretty satisfied with what our parish is doing in the world. We just had St John's Youth Services AGM and listened with delight to the stories of what this child of our parish

is achieving out there in the world. But what's next for us? What are the issues of our time and place, and how does God call us to respond?

Has our creation care focus over September inspired us to action? Do our close ties with the refugee community suggest anything to us? Does the systemic racism that oppresses Aboriginal Australia cry out to us? We might think we lack expertise; that these issues are too complicated for us. But that's what people told Ezra and Haggai. Yet they went on to build a wonder of the ancient world. God was with them, and we pray every week that God be with us. Is one of us busy with a mission that requires a team to work with them? A common rejection of the call to a new Mission Action Plan is, I've done my bit; I'm old and tired, so let someone else have a go. Do we look God in the eye and say that, or do we remember God is with us, remember the miracles, and ask the question, What's next Lord? Amen