

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for the second service – Year A, Easter 3

Lectionary Readings: **Haggai 1: 13 – 2: 9**
 1 Corinthians 3: 10 - 17
 John 2: 13 – 22

There is a common thread running through these three readings: Haggai and John are concerned with the Jewish temple; Paul writing to the Corinthians is concerned with foundations.

Both Israel and Judah have been conquered and taken into exile; Israel by the Assyrians; Judah by the Babylonians. The latter are in their turn defeated by Cyrus, King of Persia. In 538 BC Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. About 50,000 make the journey, led by Zerubbabel, and in two years of hard work complete the building of the foundations for the new temple. There is great rejoicing among the returnees but much disquiet among and opposition from The Samaritans and other neighbours who have occupied the land in the years of exile. Work on the temple stops!

The Jews now living in Jerusalem turn their attention to houses – for themselves!

Darius the Great becomes King of Persia (522 BC) and two years later we hear the first pronouncements of two new prophets – Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai is the first of the post-exile prophets and Zechariah the second. Malachi will become the third some 100 years later.

If you read the start of Chapter 1 in Haggai you will see that the prophet castigates the Jews in Jerusalem for being more concerned about their own houses rather than the House of the Lord.

“Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’” (Haggai 1: 3-4 NIV).

Haggai inspires Zerubbabel, now governor of Judah, Joshua the High Priest and the people – the building work continues.

Do you recognise familiar words used by Handel in the text of “Messiah”?

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. ⁷ I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD Almighty.” (Haggai 2: 6-7 NIV)

“The desire of all nations” – this is a Messianic reference.

There are two questions we can ask ourselves:

1. What are our priorities? (*Our houses v “The House of God”*) Maybe not actual houses but put another way - what is central to our lives?
2. How do we react, in our Faith -
 When there is opposition?
 When all is well and there is time for celebration?

Haggai has reminded his hearers of their covenant relationship with the Lord, the Lord who led them out of Egypt. We remind ourselves that the covenant is not a one way declaration; it is a **two way agreement**.

Moving on to our Gospel reading, we find Jesus, early in His Ministry, in the Temple in Jerusalem. (The other three Gospels have this as an event during Holy Week.) It is a special building for Jesus and he throws out those who are corrupting and polluting its courts.

For the traditional Jew it was the dwelling place of God – in the “Holy of Holies”. There was one day in the year (the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*) when the High Priest and he alone, could enter the Holy of Holies - going through the Veil of the Temple to offer sin offerings for the people. On that day two goats were chosen – one to become the sacrificial offering for sin, the second anointed with the blood of the first and driven out into the wilderness, carrying away the sins of the people. It was the Scape Goat.

When challenged over his action in the Temple and asked for a sign to prove his authority:

“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’” (John 2: 19 NIV)

The retort - “It has taken 46 years to build this temple! And you can do it in three days?”

“But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.” (John 2: 21-22 NIV)

At the moment of his death, Matthew, Mark and Luke record that the “Veil of the Temple” was split in two, the “curtain” was torn from top to bottom. The Holy of Holies was now open – anyone could and can enter the presence of God.

We, in 2020, can take three things from this passage:

1. Not to have “reverence” for buildings as such! Jesus loved the Temple but at the moment of His death its most central and ‘holy’ feature ceased to exist.
2. We have a Living Faith – established in the crucified and risen Jesus
3. We are right to have “zeal” for this faith.

We then come to Paul and the continuation of the building theme. Paul found, in Corinth, small cliques. They were a single Christian Community but different groups looked to the individual who had led them to Christ – almost as though that individual was more important than the Lord

“You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings?

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. ⁹For we are fellow workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.” (1 Corinthians 3: 3-9 NIV)

Paul goes on to stress that there can only be one foundation – Jesus. Any building is secure on that foundation.

But what is the quality of the building that is ours?

“If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.

¹⁴If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.

¹⁵If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.”

That word underlined – a reward? It seems contrary to our Gospel message but it does not proclaim Salvation through “Works”. This is made clear in verse 15 – the “building”, constructed from inferior material - but built on the foundation that is Jesus, is destroyed by fire leaving that firm foundation of Salvation.

What, then, is the reward? Who knows? - Something unknown, something extra.

One day we **will** know!

Let us pray that our “building” may come unscathed through the fire, that we have built well on the foundation of our faith, Jesus Christ our Lord.