

CHRIST CHURCH, VIRGINIA WATER

THE FUTURE FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

The year 520 BC was one of crisis for Jerusalem.¹

It was not the kind of crisis obvious to us all ... as when the stock markets around the world collapse and our high street banks are left short of cash ... but the dangerous state of moral paralysis which accepts as normal conditions that demand drastic changes.

Unless people of vision and determination can intervene in time ... there is no hope of recovery.

The Jews who returned from Babylon had been given to expect the very desert to burst into flower. Instead ... they found the desert encroaching on their fields and orchards ... as one year of drought succeeded another. The consequent food shortage and poverty had taken the heart out of those who might otherwise have been eager to rebuild the Temple ... which represented God's presence amongst them.

Three centuries earlier, Amos had commented on freak weather conditions and blighted harvests ... teaching that these had been God's warning signs ... which Israel had been too self-confident to recognise.

¹ Substantial reliance has been placed on material derived from, amongst other sources, the Tyndale Old Testament commentary by Joyce G Baldwin and "*Voices of 12 Hebrew Prophets*" by G Campbell Morgan.

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Though the circumstances were different now ... Haggai saw in the recurrent droughts a divine rebuke. But ... unlike Amos ... he found himself confronted with a people who were conscious of their need ... and prepared to admit their failure. They accepted Haggai's diagnosis of their situation as from God ... reorganised their lives accordingly ... and set to work.

[READ HAGGAI – SEE PAGE 15]

Haggai was a man of one message.

He represented the God whom he loved to call the Lord of hosts ... the source of all power ... the controller of armies ... both on earth and in heaven.

His God had authority

- The weather obeyed His commands (1:11)
- The whole universe was in His grasp (2:6) and
- The whole universe would one day be shaken by His hand (2:21)

This same God was consistent in His dealings with men and women.

- Though they disregarded Him, He never gave them up. When they failed to fulfil His will ... He made life hard for them ... so that they would seek Him (1:4-7).

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- When they committed themselves to His service He took pleasure in the fact ... and was glorified (1:8).
 - He changed attitudes (1:14)
 - By His Spirit, he lived among them (2:5).
- He would transform the work they did for Him ... and cause the nations to supply gifts of gold and silver ... all of which belonged to God by right (2:7-8).

Notice that Haggai does not list a great catalogue of gross sins. The Jews who returned to Jerusalem appear to have been generally law-abiding ... perhaps restrained still by continuing memories of exile.

But ... what was lacking ... what was missing ... was DISSATISFACTION WITH THINGS AS THEY WERE.

- Resignation had killed faith.
- The ruined skeleton of the Temple was like a dead body ... decaying in Jerusalem ... and making everybody contaminated (2:10-14).

How could the offence be removed?

It could be removed only by a concerted effort to rebuild. Only ACTION would be proof and pledge of a change of attitude ... a movement from RESIGNATION ... to FAITH.

Once priorities had been put right ... the presence of the Lord among them would be evident from the prosperity

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that would accompany ... both their building (2:9) ... and their agriculture (2:19).

God's universal kingdom is the ultimate goal of history.

But Haggai sees it beginning in his own time ... as personal and community affairs ... are submitted to God's rule.

It is not just that everything will turn out right in the end ... but that the unchanging God is working out HIS purposes now:

"My Spirit remains among you; do not fear" (2:5).

Present obedience sets God's people in line with fulfilment of His ultimate purpose

His Spirit fills God's people with the conviction that they are experiencing in a small measure now ... HIS KINGDOM that is to come.

Haggai's remedy for today ... as for his own day ... is a church mobilised for ACTION.

Chapter 2, verses 4 and 5. To them he would say:

- Be strong
- Work
- Fear not

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For I am with you!

God's future purpose will be achieved!

Just as Jesus Christ is more glorious than the Temple ... so God's purpose will prove to be more glorious in fulfilment than in prospect.

In summary, then:

- The people were in a state of moral paralysis ... which caused them to accept as normal ... conditions that demanded drastic changes.
- What was missing ... was a dissatisfaction with the way things were.
- Resignation had killed faith.
- And ... unless people of vision and determination would intervene in time ... there was no hope of recovery.

What is the future for the Church of England?

Before we can look ahead ... before we can consider what the future holds ... we need to know where we are ... we need to assess ... fairly and accurately and honestly ... the state we are in.

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- What state are we in?
- What is the true nature of our predicament?

Now, let me say, right away, that I am not a theologian ... I am not an expert in the Christian faith ... or religious theory. In truth, I am not really an expert in anything!

Why am I here? Well, you might well ask! I certainly can't tell you!

Nor am I a church historian ... or, indeed, any form of historian!

Nor am I a wise seer ... or a prophet ... a clairvoyant ... or a diviner! I do not possess any power enabling me to see into the future.

And, as for the Church of England, I am not even a cleric ... or even a church warden, organist or vergger.

What do I know?

Won't you please go and ask somebody else? Somebody who might have at least one qualification or skill ... which would equip them to answer this question: **what does the future hold for the Church of England?**

All I can do is to give you a very personal perspective ... a perspective which, I hope and pray ... will cause you to

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ponder ... will cause you to think ... will cause you to pause ... and, then ... to come to your own viewpoint ... with the help, and in the power, of the Holy Spirit.

My prayer is that something I say ... will serve as a catalyst ... for the extension of God's Kingdom ... so that He may be glorified.

"Well, what has Haggai could to do with all this", you may be asking?

My purpose ... in inviting you to ponder afresh the Word of God ... as it came to His people ... through the prophet Haggai ... is to consider whether it might be ... that He has the same message for us ... in the Diocese of Guildford ... in the Church of England ... at the beginning of the 21st Century.

You see:

My perspective is ... that we are in a state of moral paralysis ... which has caused us to accept as normal ... conditions that demanded drastic changes.

My perspective is ... that what we are missing ... is a dissatisfaction with the way things are.

My perspective is ... that, for some of us at least, resignation has killed faith.

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And ... unless people of vision and determination ... intervene ... in time ... there is no hope of recovery.

- If we disregard God ... if we side-step His Word ... if claim authority for ourselves ... our ministry will come under judgment.
- But if we are obedient ... if we commit ourselves to His service ... if we commit to do His will as He has taught us ... He will be glorified!

Let me give an example to illustrate:

According to the Ecclesiastical laws of the Church of England, Canon A5, in particular:

"The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures.

In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal."

The primary source of what we believe is this book ... the Bible.

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How we interpret what we consider to be the most important aspects of this book ... God's Word ... are further explained in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.

Article VI provides as follows:

"Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. ..."

Article XX provides, further, as follows:

"The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation."

This is the doctrine of the Church of England regarding the Bible.

- These are our beliefs. But do we believe them?

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- This is what we say, with our lips. But does it guide our actions?

A major problem that we face in the Church of England today ... is that

- we do not own our beliefs;
- we do not walk the talk;

Formally, there is assent to core doctrine; in practice, almost anything goes.

For too long ... in the name of a “broad church” ... like Lord Horatio Nelson ... we have put the telescope to our blind eye. We have become hardened to ... indeed, familiar with ... what I would describe as institutional hypocrisy ... or a culture of pervasive dishonesty.

Breadth of churchmanship ... which we have always accommodated ... has become confused with an ever increasing breadth of belief ... which our formularies do not.

This disfiguring growth ... for that it what it is ... requires careful, but invasive, surgery. Yet we have become so accustomed to it ... that ... in a state of paralysis ... we have forgotten that it demands drastic change.

Like the Jews in 520 BC ... what we are missing ... is a dissatisfaction with the way things are.

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Let me give one further example, if I may?

Article XVIII provides as follows:

"They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved."

This is our belief. But do we believe it? Do we own it?

Lack of belief in our beliefs has infested every level of our church. At times it has manifested itself in increasingly virulent attacks upon biblical truth and biblical morality. At times it has been led by bishops amongst whose duties it is to guard the faith. And, it is not new.

- In 1963 Bishop Robinson, then Bishop of Woolwich, published "Honest to God", in which he questioned the doctrine of God and other elements of classic Anglican teaching. A serving bishop challenging the doctrine and teaching of the Bible.
- In 1984 the then Bishop of Durham gained notoriety by commenting in a BBC interview that the belief that Jesus was raised bodily from the grave is ridiculous,

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an infantile pre-occupation with a "*conjuring trick of bones*".

- In 1985 the then Bishop of Oxford defended his cathedral's invitation to a practicing Muslim to preach the university sermon on BBC's "Thought for the Day". He quoted Jesus' words, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God" and then went on to deduce that since the Muslim concerned was working for peace in his own country, he not only came under the blessing of Jesus, but shared the title of Son of God with him. When challenged about the uniqueness of Jesus on the basis of John chapter 14, verse 6, he wrote: "*to suggest that Jesus actually said those words is to deny 150 years of scholarship in the Gospel of John*".

Are we not in a state of moral paralysis ... which has caused us to accept as normal ... conditions that demanded drastic change?

Are we not missing a dissatisfaction with the way things are?

Has resignation begun to kill our faith?

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WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

It seems to me that there are just two alternatives.

Like Haggai's audience

- we can embark upon a re-building exercise;
- we can commit to move from resignation to faith;
- we can pledge to live in obedience to His commands;
- we can mobilise for ACTION – careful, gracious, loving and firm action;
- we can hold our leaders to account ... testing whether they walk the talk ... whether they believe the beliefs of our church;
- we can stand united with Anglicans world-wide who confess the faith once delivered to the saints.

We saw from Haggai ... that when His people commit themselves to His service ... He takes pleasure in the fact ... and is glorified.

The alternative is that we remain paralysed ... like a rabbit in a head-light ... satisfied with the unsatisfactory ... resigned to inhabit forever the present discord and strife we currently enjoy.

But ... if we are satisfied with things as they are ... if we disregard the Almighty God and His Word to us ... the road will be rough ... the path will be rocky. He will make life

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difficult for us ... so that we may seek Him ... so that we may turn to Him.

The ruined skeleton of the Temple is like a dead body ... decaying ... and making everyone contaminated.

Haggai's remedy for today ... as it was for his own time ... is a church mobilised for ACTION.

Unless people of vision and determination intervene ... is there any hope of recovery?

In the words of our Lord, chapter 2, verses 4 and 5:

"... be strong, all you people ... and work. For I am with you ... and my Spirit remains with you. Do not fear."

Will we, as a Church, respond to God's call through the prophet Haggai?

Will we, as a Church, accept the diagnosis ... reorganise our lives ... and set to work?

Will we pledge to defend the faith once delivered to the saints?

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Haggai 1

A Call to Build the House of the LORD

1 In the second year of King Darius, on the 29th August 520, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

2 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.' "

3 Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai:

4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" 5 Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 6 You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.

7 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. 9 "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my

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house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. 10 Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. 11 I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

12 Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

13 Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people:

"I am with you," declares the LORD.

14 So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, 15 on the 21st September 520, in the second year of King Darius.

Haggai 2

The Promised Glory of the New House

1 On the 17th October 520, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai:

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2 "Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 3 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? 4 But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the LORD. 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the LORD, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the LORD Almighty. 5 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' 6 "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 the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 8 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 9 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Blessings for a Defiled People

10 On the 18th December 520, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai:

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11 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: 12 If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?'

The priests answered, "No."

13 Then Haggai said,

"If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?"

"Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled."

14 Then Haggai said,

"So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled. 15 Now give careful thought to this from this day on —consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple. 16 When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. 17 I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the LORD. 18 'From this day on, from this 18th day of December 520, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought: 19 Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the

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vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. From this day on I will bless you.' "

Zerubbabel the LORD's Signet Ring

20 The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the 18th December 520:

21 "Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. 22 I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. 23 " 'On that day,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the LORD, 'and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the LORD Almighty."

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QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Think of situations in which, in retrospect, you have accepted as normal conditions that demanded action.
2. Think of situations in which, in retrospect, you may have lacked dissatisfaction with the way things are.
3. Identify some of the beliefs prevalent within the Church of England that are not consistent with the beliefs of the Church.
4. Identify practices or lifestyles which some within the Church of England have come to condone but which are incompatible with Holy Scripture.
5. What can we do, individually and collectively, to rebuild the Church of England?
6. What practical steps can we take, individually and collectively, to hold leaders within the Church of England to account?
7. What can we do for others who share our vision when they appear to loose heart?