

Year C Proper 32 “Work, For I Am With You” Haggai and Luke 20 27 to 38

One of the amazing things about scripture – and I’m sure this is the hand of God at work – is the timelessness of the Word. Scripture speaks differently to us depending on our current life circumstances and needs. We can read and study the same passage many times over and be struck by new insight each time. This is what happened to me when I read the passage in Haggai. I thought to myself, “That’s the church. That’s what many people are thinking about the church these days.” So let’s think on that a little more closely because God has provided a wonderful response for Haggai to share with us.

The exiles have been returning to Jerusalem. Those who had been captured in war and taken to a foreign country had settled in that foreign country, had bought homes, raised children, but they had longed to return to their home country and it had finally happened...70 long years later...they were granted permission by the new king – a Persian king – to return home.

How exciting. Prophets like Isaiah, and Hosea, and Ezekiel had all said this time would come...the second Exodus...God would lead them home, dwell with them, be their king, life would be great...God promised, had made a covenant....

Well, they’re back home and the temple *has* been rebuilt...but it is not the same. Ezra (3:12–13) records that the people who were old enough to have seen the glory and splendour of Solomon’s original temple actually broke down and cried when they saw its shabby successor. In Nehemiah’s writings, in fact, we learn that the Israelite construction efforts were ridiculed as being so unstable that the local wildlife would demolish them by bumping into them (see Nehemiah 4:3).

“What’s going on?” the people must be wondering. Where’s God? God is supposed to be king. Life is supposed to be perfect. Instead, we’re dealing with poverty and hardship and, seriously, God does not seem to be here as king of the whole world. The exile is supposedly over but everything is most definitely not perfect. As N.T. Wright notes, the physical exile had ended for them but they were still “living in the centuries-old drama, still waiting for the turn in the story that would bring them out on top at last” (p.36 of *The Challenge of Jesus*).

This is precisely where the church finds itself. Actually, I should say, that's where the church *feels* like it finds itself. Jesus has died to defeat the power of sin and death, to free us from the evil of the world, to bring us from bondage into freedom, from death into life, and so on and so on...But, like Habakkuk complained of in last Sunday's reading: we're still surrounded by violence and brokenness. And like Haggai points out in this Sunday's reading, the church isn't great like it used to be, it's not full of people, money isn't flowing out of treasury... What's going on? We need God to return among us and be king of the whole world, make everything perfect.

But hold on. All of those things we say Jesus has done for us, he really has done – he has freed us, he has given us new life, and he is king of the whole world. So why doesn't it feel like it?

Let's think about what Jesus says and does in answer to that question. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God is at hand – which actually means that it's *here* – God's age-old plan was being revealed and God's kingship was a reality. And then he spent his brief public career showing this to be true. He began his career with his baptism in the Jordan River which would have, of course, brought to mind, for the Jewish people, their original entry into the promised land by crossing the Jordan after the 40-year Exodus. Jesus was “hinting strongly that the new Exodus, the return from exile, was about to take place” (p.39 of *The Challenge of Jesus*). Jesus taught the people how they were to live in order to enter into the kingdom. He told stories to explain what life in the kingdom was like and showed us the healing and welcome of the kingdom that was radically contrary to society's current life. Turn the other cheek, give the second coat, go the extra mile, lose the life you know in order to gain the life of God's kingdom.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus emphasizes the perfection of love and relationship that will be found in the fullness of God's kingdom. Our love for each other that brings us into relationship and, in certain circumstances, leads us into marriage, is meant to be an extension and reflection of God's love. Israel's relationship with God and the Church's relationship with Jesus Christ is often spoken of in the language of weddings and marriage. Our love is not yet perfect but, one day, it will

be the same as God's love for us and the rest of creation and then we will experience that love for all people and all creation just as God does.

Jesus issues a radical invitation to radical welcome and Luke shows us this time and again. As N. T Wright says: "Wherever Jesus went, there seemed to be a celebration; the tradition of festive meals at which Jesus welcomed all and sundry is one of the most securely established features of almost all recent scholarly portraits" (p.45). Jesus' contemporaries found his behaviour offensive. Why? "It was not just that he as an individual was associating with disreputable people; that would not have been a great offense. It was because he was doing so *as a prophet of the kingdom* and was indeed making these meals and their free-for-all welcome a central feature of his program. The meals spoke powerfully about Jesus' vision of the kingdom...Jesus' welcome symbolized God's radical acceptance and forgiveness...and he was offering it on his own authority" (p.45).

This inbreaking kingdom that Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new way of being, and Jesus was challenging his listeners – and us – to become the new people living in that new creation in the way this new world demanded...in forgiveness and prayer, in joy and welcome, in sharing and compassion.

Jesus showed us that he took his message of life in God's kingdom seriously by living it himself. His life of turning the other cheek, going the second mile, being the light of the world led him to the cross where he would defeat evil by letting it do its worst to him. The way into the kingdom was the way of peace, the way of love, the way of the cross. At the heart of Jesus' message is his challenge for us to take up his cross. To live as a new people in the new creation in the new way that kingdom-life demands of us. We are that new people in God's kingdom – passing from death to life, just as Jesus did, through the mystery of baptism. Dying with him, rising to new life in God's kingdom, given the presence of God within us, the end of our long exodus from the exile of the broken world into the wonderful life with God in God's kingdom.

And that brings us back where we started. Just as the Israelites were back in the promised land, we *are* living in God's kingdom...yet things are not completely wonderful. The answer God gave to the people through the prophet Haggai is our

answer today: Take courage all you people; work, for I am with you. I'm working toward the promise I made to you when I led you on your exodus away from the ways of this world. My Spirit is with you, do not fear. I'm in control. I will do what I said I will do and the glory and splendour of my house will be greater than it ever was.

The kingdom is here. The kingdom is coming. That is our reality. God rules. This is God's kingdom. The fullness of the kingdom is still to come and we must be a part of that if we want to see it. Did you catch one of the most important phrases in that passage? *Work*, God tells us. Work for I am with you. The kingdom is here. The kingdom is coming. Let's get to work.