

**12 February 2017. Sarah Thomas .**

## **Generous People: Getting our priorities right**

### **Giving in Grace Sermon 2 Haggai 1:1-11 and Mark 12:38-44**

Does anyone know someone who has been involved in a communal self-build project? Not one of those over the top Grand Design jobs, but where a small housing development of basic homes is built by those who will live in them.

I've met two couples who have been part of such a scheme. It's back breaking work and is a massive commitment, in terms of time, energy, patience and good humour. For those whose house is last on the list, the wait to get started on your own home can feel never ending. If your house is one of those that is finished first, you can't sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labours, instead you carry on, whatever the weather, whatever your mood or your state of health, until the last house in the development is finished, the pull to renege on your commitment is a big one. But it is joint project which involves self-sacrifice. And the sense of satisfaction and community when it is done is amazing. Neither of the two couples I know gave up. They and the others in their schemes stuck it out to the finish line.

Whereas our Old Testament reading from the book of the prophet Haggai shows a different story.

Let me take you back to the last century of the Old Testament Jewish history. Any of you who did the Walk through the Old Testament will remember that following wars with Assyria, the people of the land of Israel were scattered and that following wars with the Babylonians, the people of Judah were taken into exile in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC and Jerusalem and the Temple were reduced to rubble. 70 years later, King Cyrus allowed Ezra and 42,000 others to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Those who stayed behind in Babylon supported them with freewill gifts of silver, gold, tools and pack animals.

When they arrived back in Judah, they found places to live in their home towns and 7 months later they gathered in Jerusalem and rebuilt the Altar of God. The following year they got started on the foundations of the temple and there was great praising of God.

But then it stopped. There was opposition, morale dropped, apathy set in and for the next 15 years there was no progress. They procrastinated, they had ambitions for themselves, not for God.

Step up Haggai. Thanks to him the Temple was completed. Unlike other prophets who preached repentance and salvation, Haggai's message could sound rather prosaic. On the face of it he seems like a bricks and mortar man. He shamed the people into finishing what they had started. But it was more than that, the reason his efforts have permanent relevance is because his basic concern is with priorities not with buildings.

We heard the first of four messages from God. He acknowledges that their lives are hard, food and clothing are in short supply and prices are soaring. He tells them that is because they have their priorities wrong. When people are wrapped up in their own selfish concerns and God is neglected, the very things they work for will elude them. So they were stopping God's work from thriving. Within 3 weeks work on the temple is resumed. But simply resuming work won't make the workman right with God. Haggai tells them to have a good look at their lives. How can they spend time and money making their own homes fine when God's work is neglected? How can they spend money and have little to show for it, earn wages and put them into a bag with holes? Whilst the immediate priority might be completing the temple, the long term priority is doing God's work. For you know, disillusion set in again after the work was finished, the prosperity God had promised didn't seem to have materialised. But what is God's idea of prosperity? The Bible doesn't let us think that doing God's will make us rich in money, or in possessions. No, we will be rich in the fruits of the Spirit. We will be

rich in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And God will honour our gifts, the money and time we give sacrificially, for the work of his kingdom.

Speaking 80 years after Haggai, Malachi's message to the Jews, and to us, is that God's love for his people is immense, anything we give to God is only a minute return on all we owe him. When we hold back from giving, through self interest, we deprive ourselves of all the good things God would otherwise give us.

Jesus, speaking to his disciples, commended giving to God's work. Even though he seems to have recognised that the rich were giving what the law required from them, he criticised them for the attitude with which they gave. The look at me, aren't I great attitude. And a sense that they didn't miss what they were giving, because they had more than enough left. Giving should be something that we notice when it's gone, that it costs us to give.

Rowan Williams in his book *Being Disciples*, notes that selfishness is the god of our culture, much as it was in Haggai's time. He tells us that God works with imperfect people, me and you, but that shouldn't make us feel complacent and allow us to stand still.

We have spent money on building works that give us a great space for worship, for community events, for hospitality and welcome. We cannot stop there. As Haggai tells us, the priority is not merely buildings. Yes, it is good to maintain, to heat, to light, it is good stewardship.

But we also want to be generous. To have the resources to properly teach those who are seeking God. Who want to understand what response Jesus wants from us. We want to grow disciples who will lead small groups, who will encourage those younger in the faith. Jesus said let the children come to me. We want to capture the imagination of our children. We want to inspire our young people. We want to be inspired ourselves, for we too are children. Whenever I read a familiar passage of scripture I find something new in it, don't you? And maybe there will be a new generation of people who will interpret what Jesus is saying to this new world we find ourselves in.

Our vision is that this church will continue to grow. We have a vision for a youth worker who will inspire our young people. That will cost money. We have a vision of contributing wholeheartedly to the work of the Diocese, supporting congregations who are poorer than we are. Teaching the teachers of the future requires people with time and energy.

And for many of us, our income has stood still for years or we are facing new burdens. And that's where sacrifice comes in. The woman who is described as poor in our gospel reading, gave all she had for that day. The song we sing at the beginning of the service says: 'not what you give, but what you keep, is what the King is counting.' It's not the amount we give but the value we give to what we give away. It's about simplifying our lives and expectations. To be on our guard against greed. To manage on less and give away more. To distinguish between necessities and luxuries, occasional celebrations and routine splurges. It's about having a radical trust that God will provide. For God loves each of us, he loves each bit of us. He doesn't love us in fractions, so we shouldn't only offer a fraction of ourselves. If we live wholeheartedly for God, all the time, not just a couple of hours on Sunday, then we can be wholehearted in what we decide to contribute to the work of God's kingdom here in Henleaze, Bristol and beyond.

Jesus gave all of himself, all he had, when he died for us. He doesn't demand that same literal sacrifice. But he does want us to contribute realistically to the work of the kingdom.