

Sermon on Haggai 2: 1-9

During the darkest periods of history, quite often a small number of men and women, scattered throughout the world, have been able to reverse the course of the history of humankind. This was only possible because they hoped beyond all hope. What had been bound for decay then entered into a stream of new life. Brother Roger of Taizé.

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.

He hasn't been much of a talker, my husband. Never has been. But it had become increasingly noticeable the longer he worked so far away from family and friends. He has always left the family communications to me... to set rules and argue over limits with our sons and daughters has been my job for a long time. To organise the boys to look after our few goats, and to teach the girls to cook a meal and bake the bread were on my daily list not on his...

When my Nathan comes home on the occasional free day he is often so exhausted, so washed out, so tired that I barely dare to ask him to give me a hand with a few household chores which I cannot manage on my own, for which a man is needed...

It's not that he wouldn't do them, or that he would complain about them, or even refuse to do them. No. He is a good husband. And what counts even more, he is a loving and gentle dad to our seven wonderful children.

They are all so smart. So promising... But what future do we have to offer them? What purpose in life other than working from morning till night and still not earning enough or harvesting enough to feed the many hungry mouths...

But let me start where it all began...

I am Dina. It is the year 520 BC. We live in a small village near Jerusalem. We work the land and have some animals.

Our country was suffering from a disastrous economic crisis. People were desperate and anxious. Our three main crops (grain, grapes and olives) had failed, and all our work had been for nothing. First the droughts, then the famines... Prices of everything on the market had increased out of all proportion. Food was scarce and unaffordable. Clean water had become something people had started fighting about. Normal everyday things like a new tunic for my oldest son because he'd grown out of his old one and passed it on

to his younger brother, or scarves for the girls were hard to get. Many people, but most of all the kids, had almost no clothes to wear.

We'd always been poor, but not so poor.

Nathan and I and many others of our generation had been born just outside Jerusalem, the great magnificent city of God. But we had been born at a time when that place had been lying in ruins for decades.

When our parents were young the Babylonian army had won a terribly brutal victory over our small nation, had taken most of the upper class people, the priests and teachers and craftspeople into captivity to Babylon. Not all of them though. So a small minority of educated people and lots of peasants and unskilled workers had remained in Israel...

The Babylonians had torn down our great city and not left one stone on top of another. My family's nice town house had been turned into a heap of stones.

They moved into one of the villages nearby and started a new life. We grew our own vegetables, and always had a few grapes or olives, sometimes even some grain which we didn't need ourselves but could take to the market...

But then the drought came, the famine followed, and as if that was not enough of a challenge for the local people, thousands of immigrants arrived in and near Jerusalem. No strangers though, but up to 50.000 people who'd been sent into Babylonian exile and now came back to their long lost home country. 50.000 means the men only – we don't count women and children these days... We locals call the homecomers "the rest" of the people... and we find it hard to welcome them and integrate them. But they are determined to "win" – win back their freedom and dignity, their homes and houses, their former happiness and all that had made their and their mothers' and fathers' lives worth living.

We had kept the devastated country as best as we could. But now these homecomers, former upper class people and demanded more than the land could give.

Our entire and very mixed society needed a new political and social order.

One of the things they all, - and we too really - wanted back was the temple. The rebuilding of the temple became one of the significant symbols of the changes which people longed for, but there never seemed to be enough money...

Many of the homecomers had a clear idea of what the temple had been like and how it should be in the future. They recruited builders to move to Jerusalem and work on the temple.

That was when my Nathan decided to leave the other eight of us and work there in the city.

Freedom from the Babylonians did not mean freedom from foreign rulers; we had now been conquered by the Persians. But they let us live our own lives.

Since politics were determined by "outsiders" and the "palace" was in Persian hands, the importance of the temple being in local hands seemed so necessary to our long oppressed and impoverished nation. Since the Persians were not only willing to grant religious independence but also supported the idea of building up the temple again that had been destroyed, all hopes were now set on the new "house of God"... reappearing up there on Mount Zion.

Sometimes when Nathan came home to see us and wasn't too tired he would tell us of difficulties between the local workers and the homecomers. The work on the temple had become increasingly frustrating. Nathan and his colleagues had been working for almost a month or so when the "rest" of the people, some of the homecomers told them that they thought the re-built temple was small and worthless, - "like nothing at all" by comparison with the old one, they said. Some of the old folks had a vivid memory of the size and beauty of the old temple, but my Nathan and his men did not. And means were limited too. With the negative attitude of the homecomers towards to new building the young builders were getting more and more discouraged. I feared for the happiness of my husband. I could see the little joy in life which he still had, slowly disappear...

And I was thrilled to bits when, one day, Nathan came rushing home – unannounced – we had not expected him at all -, embracing me and the kids and beaming with enthusiasm and joy.

An old man had appeared on their building site on 17 October 520. Nathan thinks he must be over 80 or so... Haggai, as he was called, remembered the old temple too. But instead of discouraging and criticising the young builders, he called on them to be strong. He must have urged them not to lose heart and assured them of the presence of God with them.

God, he said, would support and protect them. God would give them the energy they needed to complete the job.

Haggai helped them remember how God had been with their ancestors, and that he'd surely be committed to them too, that his spirit would remain with them, and that they had nothing to fear...

I had never heard Nathan talk so much, and so long and becoming almost breathless with all the good and exciting news he shared. My depressed and shy Nathan was beaming and talking loudly and there was a radiance in his expression which hadn't been there for years.

Nathan walked up and down in our village centre. And the longer he spoke, the more clearly we were able to picture the old man Haggai visiting the builders in the temple and speaking with them.

We could hear him talk about God who would act powerfully, who would shake the heavens and the earth and all the nations, and who promised that the "treasure of all nations" would come... people would eat their fill again. The political and economic situation of the struggling nation would change, business and trade, culture and education would be restored and would blossom again...

We listened breathlessly as Nathan retold Haggai's words... "Do not worry that your temple is too small. The glory of your temple does not depend on its outer appearance but on its inner life. It will be the more glorious the more you fill it with life and joy. God will give the building its glory, neither the materials it was made of nor its size can do that!"

And then I couldn't believe my ears. Nathan not only reported Haggai's speech. No. He began interpreting it.

My Nathan a speaker?

“It is the task of each generation,” Nathan said, “to draw courage in God’s goodness, and to work on behalf of God’s purposes.” Loyalty and dedication would be measured by the degree of willingness to stick to the task...

And back he went to re-build the temple... With firm steps we could see him walk towards Jerusalem again.

He was a changed man, because he had resisted discouragement and depression. Because he’d met this old man, the nourisher of his dreams, and the giver of new enthusiasm and strength.

It isn’t only Nathan who now walks upright and talks openly. All the builders do.

And the population is convinced that the ill health of their community, its economic weakness, its vulnerability will be replaced by God’s peace. God’s Shalom – a rich term that includes health, friendship, peace, justice and happiness. Shalom!

This all happened months ago... It is midday and out there in the distance I can see

Nathan herd the goats with the boys. They seem to be talking...

And when they come back in the evening we will have a simple meal of bread and wine, and some delicious goat’s cheese.