

Sunday 2 February 2025
Evensong on the Feast of Candlemas

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Haggai 2: 1-9

Psalm 122

Gp: John 2: 18-20

Today we celebrate the feast of Candlemas, where Jesus was presented in the Temple by Mary and Joseph. Simeon and Anna's hopes were fulfilled, and they recognised Jesus as God's rescue plan. Our evensong readings do not invite us to see the baby Jesus presented in the Temple; instead, they speak of temples destroyed and rebuilt and mixed emotions. In John 2 against the backdrop of the Temple, Jesus refers to his body as a temple and rather than a physical temple, he is talking about his own death and resurrection. In the reading from Haggai, we are invited into a key part of the backstory of the Temple in Jerusalem whose ultimate meaning and purpose is revealed in Jesus.

In the final decades of the sixth century, we encounter Haggai among the people of Judah under the governorship of Zerubbabel. It has been 15 years since the people had returned home from exile. However, this was not proving to be a return worthy of the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekial, where it might seem that Israel would be reunited around a restored Jerusalem with a Temple fit to be the source of the river of life. Little progress has been made since the return of the people and the Lord's house lay in ruins. In chapter 1, Haggai comes up with a wake up call and God stirs the spirits of the people into action.

In chapter 2, Haggai has returned to rally the people and address an issue with the rebuilding project. The problem is simple: in comparison to Solomon's Temple, this one was underwhelming. This was not a perfect building project. The prophet comes with a timely reminder about what ultimately gives meaning to the Temple. The word of the Lord comes through Haggai in a form that echoes the ancient promises of God to Moses, and to Joshua: 'Take courage!' 'I am with you, do not fear'. The source of courage, the source of comfort is the promise of the presence of the one whose mighty hand has worked throughout history. The presence without which the Temple means nothing.

When my daughter was younger, she would enjoy making glitter pictures where you would design a picture in glue and pour glitter all over it. You'd wait for it to dry and then shake off the excess glitter. Mid- project it can look a complete mess, but when it is shaken up the picture is revealed. As the word of the Lord comes to the people through the prophet, there is a promise of future action. God is going to shake things up. God will shake the nations and that which is treasured by the nations will be revealed. As God shakes things up, what is unmissable is that everything belongs to God and the splendour of God's dwelling place is entirely and only within God's gift, in God's timing. What God is about is the stuff that matters, the stuff that sticks.

Candlemas offers one last hurrah for contemplating the infancy of God incarnate and looking forward to what will unfold in the life of Jesus. The people of Haggai's time were promised a future that belied their unpromising construction. The Temple in Jerusalem would play its part in the greatest shakedown in history when God would reveal the true Temple, the true desire of the nations.

At this time, we might be disappointed by our imperfect projects or over-invested in things that will not last. Focusing on what is being taken apart, built up or shaken up in the present may lead us to forget the one who is present. It has been an unsettling time in the Church of England for the last few weeks and more recently this week within our own Liverpool Diocese. Whatever has gone on, whatever will go on- the inevitable shake ups in personnel, processes and systems, we need to remember the one who redeems and sustains us. God is above any system, any building and set of structures. Whilst it may all feel a bit unsettling at the moment and we might feel a bit shaken up, God remains true and dependable, and he will show us the clarity that we need to continue in our walk with him.

Mthr Jennifer Brady