Resources for your church:

**Sermon**

If you build it, he will come

Haggai 1:1-15

There is plenty of material in this sermon. It has been delivered as a single sermon in 25 minutes. If a New Testament reading is required, consider Matthew 25:14-30.

The material can equally well be preached across two shorter sermons. The reading for the second sermon would be Haggai 2:1-9. The accompanying sermon notes offer background material to support this.

The preacher is, of course, entirely free to amend, edit and delete material to suit the local tradition and context.
Text

‘You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought into the house I blew away. Why?’ declares the Lord.
‘Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house.’
(Haggai 1:9)

Introduction

A passenger in a taxi begins to think to herself, ‘I’m sure he’s not going the right way.’ So she leans forward and taps the driver on the shoulder to get his attention. The driver screams, careers across the road, hits two buses, then a bike, and ends up in a ditch. The woman gets out shaking, battered and a little bruised, and says, ‘I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t think interrupting you by a quick tap on the shoulder would cause such chaos.’ He turns, pale faced and giddy, and says, ‘I’ve driven a hearse for 25 years. I only started taxi driving last week.’

For about 25 years the economy has given us easy credit, with a boom and some bust, which has allowed us to do all sorts of things. And for about 25 years there has been a sense of growing affluence in our nation. Then, suddenly, we are tapped on the shoulder by a credit crunch, a banking crisis and an economic downturn. Haggai spoke to an economically-vulnerable nation in recession.

Haggai has the difficulty of being the preacher who is talking about a big vision, a fresh commitment and a new generosity to a people burdened by the worries of recession.

But, however difficult it is for the preacher, it is ten times more difficult for the prophet to ask what it means to be faithful stewards of all God has given to us – our time and talents and treasure. What does it mean to be a faithful steward in recession?

If you build it he will come

The film ‘Field of Dreams’ stars Kevin Costner as Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer. He is out in his cornfield one day when he hears a voice from nowhere saying, ‘If you build it, he will come,’ – that’s it. ‘If you build it, he will come.’ Ray Kinsella builds a baseball field in the middle of his corn. His neighbours think he is crazy, his wife is worried, and he is not so sure himself! But he builds it, and others are blessed… for the rest, watch the film!

‘If you build it, he will come.’ That is pretty much the message of Haggai in 520BC. Build and God will reveal his glory and his presence and heal the land. Haggai does not want a baseball field, but the temple in Jerusalem. For a nation rebuilding itself after exile and struggling with tough economic times, his message is as crazy as Ray Kinsella’s. How do we make sense of God’s call for us to be generous when belts are being tightened? How do we allow Jesus to be Lord of our money and possessions when we feel anxious and fearful about the future? What does it mean to be faithful stewards in recession? Let’s look at Haggai’s message and see what we can learn.
Now is not the time

Haggai asks the people of Israel a question from God: ‘Is it really a time for you to be building your own houses when my house is in ruins? Is it really a time to be concentrating on your own concerns when our place of worship – the temple – is not as it should be?’

Do you remember Screwtape, CS Lewis’ senior devil who trained his juniors to put the Christians off their stride, to make them ineffective? We can imagine him saying in Haggai’s day, ‘Don’t tell them the temple isn’t important because they won’t believe you. Don’t tell them that sacrifice and worship don’t matter because they won’t believe that either. Don’t tell them that the temple should not be rebuilt because they won’t believe you.

‘Just tell them that there is no hurry. Tell them that now is not the right time.’

The problem with recession is that it releases a spirit of anxiety and fearfulness; a sense of holding back, even defensiveness. Projects get put on the back burner while church treasurers get anxious about income. Giving is withheld or reduced and talk of generosity seems foolish. Recession always carries the danger that we retreat into a privatised world. We focus on ourselves and we make decisions, especially financial ones, in a privatised way. We exclude even God from our decisions.

In his inaugural presidential address in 1933, in the midst of the great depression, Roosevelt said that we have nothing to fear except fear itself. He knew that fear strips away joy in the present and any confidence in the future. It takes away vision and purpose. Instead of looking outwards and flourishing, we turn in on ourselves. It is as though when we are under pressure the fault lines appear in our lives.

[The complex question of British jobs for British workers would suggest that this is a national fear as well as an individual one]

Roosevelt was right. We cannot let fear diminish our present and our future. We cannot let fear diminish our faith and confidence in a God who has promised to provide for us. Because that spirit of fear and anxiety can cripple ministry, cripple our spiritual lives and cripple generosity. Fear and anxiety can, without us really knowing or intending it, push the claims of God and the lordship of Jesus to the margins of our lives, while we get on with the business of coping and surviving.

We see this in the parable of the talents – our second reading from Matthew 25. ‘I know you to be a hard man,’ says the lazy servant, so he buries his talents. He exercises no freedom, takes no risks, and honours no master. The point is that handling our money or responding to economic pressure from a standpoint of fear or defensiveness can come between us and God. It can also come between us and our community, as each looks just to his or her own needs.

I know this is really hard to hear when people’s lives have been shattered by the credit crunch. When we are frightened of losing our jobs, when we are genuinely anxious about our families, when we can no longer meet debts which we thought were manageable, it is hard to hear that we must not put generosity to the margins of our lives. But it is a question we must ask of ourselves.

One of the difficulties in a recession is that we begin to make decisions, not on the basis of what has happened, but in the fear of
what might happen. If someone has lost their job or had their hours reduced, or if income has fallen because savings rates have gone through the floor, there is no shame or embarrassment in reducing giving proportionately. But we should not reduce giving out of fearfulness of what might happen.

[If your church is embarking on a new capital project or a staff appointment, you might want to include something here that positively affirms what has been achieved or encourage the church not to lose heart or vision. As we enter this recession we may feel in our hearts that – ‘now is not the time for our church to….’]

So my challenge here is this: are we allowing fear, defensiveness, anxiety, or self-concern to push God to the edges of our life? As individuals, churches, or as a society?

The challenge of affluence

Haggai says in verses 5 and 6, ‘Consider your ways. Look at what is happening to you. You plant much but you haven’t got a lot to show for it, you drink but you are never full, you eat but you are never quite satisfied, you put on your clothes but you are never quite warm and, that powerful picture, you’ve got money but you put it in bags that have holes.’ This is a telling picture for an affluent society. We work harder, do longer hours, and have more than ever before – yet we are not satisfied. I think the ‘panelled houses’ would be a reference to the richly-polished wooden panels that often decorate the homes of the wealthy. Not everyone has them, but we would all like them! Haggai is challenging the people to consider their lifestyles, and the choices they make about their standard of living.

In school, we learnt in maths that you had to balance each side of an equation. The advert for the old Access card told us to take the waiting out of wanting. But if we change the waiting we will also change the wanting.

[It would be useful if a simple, personal story could be told here about the impact of consumerism on our lives]

Now, human beings have always been greedy and wanted more, but as we get more affluent, the opportunities for expressing that greed are greater than ever before. Haggai’s picture of bags with holes is a powerful image. In a recession, we probably begin to spend less – reigning in our use of credit and so on. But I think the message of Haggai runs deeper. God does not want us to just patch up our bags and wait for things to get back to normal. Instead, we must find a new way of living as faithful stewards of all that God has given to us. Don’t patch the bags; get new bags! Rediscover what contentment means as individuals, as families, as churches and hopefully as a society. Rediscover gratitude, learn to receive with thanksgiving, and appreciate all you have. We need to break the power of a desire to have more and more, which can so subtly influence the way we think and act.

The church does have something to say to a nation about a different way of living, about other values than wealth or profit or accumulating more. It is no accident that Haggai speaks to the secular leader Zerubbabel, and the religious leader Joshua and to all the people. The challenge is to all of us.

This bloke walks into a restaurant with an ostrich. He orders ‘steak, chips and peas please,’ and the ostrich says, ‘I’ll have the same as you darling.’ At the end of the meal the bill comes to exactly £15.52. The bloke
puts his hand in his pocket and immediately produces the right money. The couple come in a lot and the same thing happens every day. Whatever the man orders, the ostrich has the same, and when the bill comes, the man always has the right money. One day, the waitress says, ‘Do you mind me asking? How is it that no matter what the bill is, you always have exactly the right money as soon as you put your hand in your pocket?’

‘Well,’ the man replies, ‘I was up in the loft cleaning a while back and I found a lamp and gave it a dust. A genie popped out and said, “You can have any wish you want.” So I just wished that I would always have just enough for what I needed at any particular time; not too much; not too little; just exactly what I needed at that moment.’

The waitress said, ‘I think that’s remarkable. You could have asked for riches beyond your wildest imagination but you just asked for exactly what you needed at any particular time. That’s incredible. But do you mind me asking another thing?’ she continued.

‘Where does the ostrich fit into this?’ ‘Ah, that was my second wish,’ said the man, smiling. ‘I had all I wanted; I just wished that I could share it with a tall, leggy bird that would agree with everything I said!’

Repair the temple

In verse 7 Haggai says again, ‘Consider your ways’ – this time, referring to what they should be doing. ‘If you build it he will come,’ Haggai says to them. ‘I want you to put God back at the centre of your personal lives. I want you to put God back at the centre of your church and national life. I don’t just want your minds and your hearts to be revolving around your survival and your comfort, I want you to find a place for God at the centre of your personal life and at the centre of your financial life and at the centre of where your energy is absorbed.

‘It’s not that you shouldn’t be concerned about the day-to-day business of living,’ says Haggai. ‘It’s not that you shouldn’t be anxious if there is a worry that your job is on the line; it’s not that you should be concerned if things are changing for you.’ Haggai is not for one second saying that these things do not matter. It would be foolish and it would be hurtful to people who are really struggling if that is what the scripture was saying; a kind of a bland trust in God.

What Haggai is asking them to do is to keep these things in balance and make sure that they don’t push God to the margins of their faith and life. Faith is not a luxury that we enjoy in the good times; faith is about how we live when we are under pressure.

Sacred space – places where we worship – are important. But Haggai is not so much concerned about a building as about getting the community to re-focus on worship and trust in God. He wants them to put God back at the centre of their economic life, at the centre of their domestic life, at the centre of their life as a nation. In Jesus’ words, ‘seek first the kingdom’ (Matthew 6v33) and these other things will fall into place for you because your heavenly father knows what you need.
The challenge I think is this. Just as Haggai urged the people to take practical action and build – what action can you take around your personal finances and your household situation to put God back at the centre? Do you pray about money? Do you share everything with your partner? Do you need to address debt, or make a budget? Do you need to start giving or do you need to increase your giving because you are in a good place while some in the body are hurting?

Don’t let money, don’t let survival, don’t let fear, and don’t let anxiety absorb from you everything that you have. Keep God at the centre.

Glory and presence

And, with the challenge, comes a promise, which is twofold. The first promise is that the people will see the glory of the Lord. When Nehemiah built the walls of Jerusalem, bigger and stronger walls had already been destroyed. Nehemiah built the walls and hung the gates – not to keep the enemy out – but to declare the glory of God and the presence of God within the city. It wasn’t defensive, it was a proclamation that God was in this place.

Even in the midst of a recession, as people are anxious, there is an invitation here to discover the glory of God, the provision of God, the faithfulness of God, the care of God and the sustaining of God – for ourselves, for our families, for our churches and, I believe, for our nation as well.

Then comes the second promise – ‘I am with you,’ says God. Whatever it is that we are facing as recession comes, whatever the anxieties for our children, our grandchildren, all the people whom we love, there is a promise here that rings loud and true – ‘I am with you.’ We don’t walk through this alone. God is with us and so are other members of the body of Christ.

We need to take practical action, where we can, to help those who are struggling. It might be a hardship fund in the church. Or making food and clothing vouchers available to lift the burden on an individual. It might be helping out with a birthday celebration. What hospitality and support can you offer to those who risk losing their homes? Is there a room or rooms in someone’s home for a month or so for a family who have had their home repossessed? Don’t wait until the problem crops up before finding a solution.

What about those who have benefited from the recession? What is the responsibility on me as someone who is coping in this recession towards giving more, when others have to give less?

Shaking the nations

In chapter 2 at the Feast of the Tabernacles, those who remembered the first temple said, ‘It’s not like it use to be.’ Does that sound familiar – like when we knock down the Victorian church to build a modern one? In one sense, the temple wasn’t the same. It didn’t have the glamour and ostentation of Solomon’s temple. But Haggai encourages them with his prophecy of God shaking the nations.

And when you think of what’s happened recently in this country and right across the world to nations and to corporate institutions, doesn’t the word ‘shaking’ describe exactly what we’ve been going through? Things are not be the same as they used to be. When Lehmann’s bank collapsed, the confidence within the banking industry collapsed with it.
I don’t believe that God has engineered or intervened to create a banking and economic crisis. Events have shown that we are perfectly capable of doing that for ourselves! But I do believe that you reap what you sow. If we build an economy on debt, and if wealth creation is driven by greed and profit to the exclusion of justice, social care, sharing, generosity or any spiritual values, then we create trouble for ourselves.

But Haggai’s message does teach us that God is in control; that he is sovereign and that he can, and wants, to do a new thing. I think that is what we need to be praying for – that, out of this shaking, there is at least a more gentle form of capitalism – a less aggressive profit-driven form of capitalism. A capitalism that puts social justice and the welfare of people front and centre. If we don’t do that, then it seems to me that there will be boom and bust for the rest of history.

We need to be praying for Christians who are bankers, economists and politicians – that this ‘shaking’ of the nations will produce a more just world. The poorest people on earth are silently paying the price of the collapse of the banking industry in the western world. Cash-rich countries are now buying up land and dispossessing people in some of the poorest countries of Africa and elsewhere to grow food to be exported out of Africa back to their own countries. This is happening while we are so concerned - in Haggai’s words - for our own financial houses.

The silver and gold is mine

Which leads me to one final point from Haggai. This shaking, he says, will bring the wealth of nations to Jerusalem. When God firmly states, ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ it’s a reminder that everything that we possess is under the ownership and the lordship of Christ.

This is not my money, it’s money that has been entrusted to me; it’s not my possession, it’s something that has been entrusted to me. There is a liberating dependence on God when we come to understand that.

Generosity is woven throughout this story of Haggai like a golden thread. Building requires generosity of time, talents and, of course, our treasure. Generosity has to be part-and-parcel of the way we think and act – as faithful stewards before God.

Haggai speaks of how the ‘wealth of nations’ will bless the temple in Jerusalem. This ‘wealth of the nations’ may sound a little strange, but when we go to work or even receive benefits, the wealth of the nations is already flowing through our hands. The challenge of Haggai is to let that generosity flow into the service of the kingdom of God.
Recent research on American giving suggests that if American protestant Christians were giving as they could and should be, their giving would release $46 billion extra to the service of the kingdom of God. The research goes on to state that this is a conservative estimate and the true figure is probably nearer $85.5 billion! The Christian charity Stewardship has charitable bank accounts for tax efficient giving. They have around 32,000 clients, those who give and need to receive. In 2008, giving through Stewardship’s hands was just under £50million – Christians giving to Christians in need. That just gives us a snapshot of what is possible.

In conclusion, we don’t ignore the difficulties; we don’t pretend that they are not real. Instead, we look for the opportunities to minister to those who are struggling.

The recession poses a lot of important questions:

What does it mean for us to be faithful as stewards in the context of recession?

What are the day-to-day implications for us in living generously as a hallmark of what it means to be a faithful steward before almighty God?

The word of God challenges us to not allow God to be pushed to the margins and promises us his glory and his presence in return.

Amen.