

HAGGAI 1:15-2:9 Out of the Ashes

We have some friends in Jindabyne who live on a property about 5 kms out of town. When they first moved there, they had a young family and not much money, so Bruce decided to build the home himself. It was one of those projects that took them 20 years to complete. It was a lovely home, nothing flash, but full of light, careful planning and cozy, home crafted furnishings. It was also completely off the grid, powered by solar panels, and the water came from the Snowy River. It was a work of art, and of clever engineering way before it's time - much loved by the family, and much admired by friends.

They told us their story not long after we'd met them. It had been a particularly hot and dry summer that year and they had gone into Jindabyne for a church function. As they wended their way home over the hills that evening, there was a haze of smoke on the horizon. As they got closer to home, it seemed that there was a bushfire not far from their place, and they wondered whose property it was on. As they drove in their gate and crested the hill of their acreage, they saw the smoking ruin of their beloved home on the other side. The fire was just packing up. They had been unable to control the fire, and all that was left was a charred frame and smoking rubble. It was before mobile phones and the fire had not been able to contact our friends.

They were utterly devastated. Kindly neighbours put them up that night, and saw that they had clothes to change into the next morning. But with each passing hour the realisation of what they had lost grew and grew, until it threatened to overwhelm them. They had lost everything! Their photos; their treasured keepsakes from their children's school days; favourite paintings, hand crafted furnishings, all their clothes, their collections - not to mention the brilliant engineering of the home - all of it, up in smoke.

How do you recover from something like that? Well, for our our friends it it was not an easy road. But in time, strengthened by their faith and the love of their christian community, they got through it. In time, with the help of insurance funds, and the willing hands of church, family and friends, they were able to rebuild.

When we met them, a new home had risen from those ashes, not the same as the first, but roomy, comfortable, and which had given them a fresh new start. Their story is something of a parable for us.

In our Old Testament reading, we hear the prophet Haggai speaking words of encouragement to the governor of Judah, to the high priest, and to the remnant of

Israel. These were the people that had returned from exile in Babylon. They had come back to desecration - much like our friends to their home after the fire. The Temple - their beautiful temple, their place of worship and powerful symbol of their faith - had been totally destroyed. They had lost their heart, and they'd pretty much lost their faith.

I can understand that. Perhaps you can too.

The task of rebuilding seemed so immense that they couldn't even imagine starting. Rebuilding had actually begun many years ago, but had been abandoned. It was in the too hard basket.

In the midst of their despair, Haggai encouraged the people of God to resume the task enthusiastically. Haggai's message was simply 'Get back into it! Hang in there and build God's house!' The exhortation came with two promises:

1. Be strong! You're not on your own!

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.

The message was so needed for the Israelites just then. It was just all too hard for them. They'd given up. But God encouraged them to get back into it; to start again, and his promise was that they were not alone. God himself was with them by his Spirit.

This is inspiring for us also, isn't it? There are often times in our own lives, when a setback we receive is just one setback too many. Or when when setting right what has gone wrong in our lives seems way too hard and we are tempted to give up.

Through the Holy Spirit, we also know that God is with us to strengthen and encourage us.

Then God gave them a second promise:

2. I will restore what you have lost

God continues to encourage his people with the promise that they would regain all that they had lost, and then some!

...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 later 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.

This echoes the words of the prophet Joel where he also speaks God's encouragement to the people: "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you."

God promised restoration, not just of what they'd lost, but by giving back to them in far greater abundance than they ever dreamed of!

As with so many Old Testament prophecies, this had a fulfilment in the 'now' - the temple was rebuilt in great splendour - but it also had a fulfilment in the 'not yet'. It spoke of a fulfilment that was to come in far greater measure, in an age to come - that age being the coming of Christ's kingdom in all its fullness.

So what is there here for us this morning?

1. There is the exhortation to 'hang in there' - and not give up. - because God is in this with us!

I find that encouraging when I look at the Church. When Jay got home last night, and we were talking over dinner, he filled me in on all he was doing at the house in Jindabyne (though we have been ringing each other most nights...) and I filled him in on all that was happening in the parish and in the deanery, at the schools and in the diocese. There are indeed positives, but there are also so many challenges - particularly facing the wider church. I stopped and sighed at one point. Sometimes it's easy to look at all the problems and wonder if we'll ever make real headway.

As I went back into my study to finish this message, God whispered to me, "You should listen to your own sermon." He does that - so often! I read it through and was encouraged.

Ultimately, this Church and the wider church is God's Church. He's in this with us. He's telling us to hang in there and keep building. The time will come - perhaps in our day, perhaps not - when the Kingdom of God will come in all its glory. We won't know what's hit us! I am SO looking forward to that!

And the message is the same for us struggling with personal challenges; those times when plugging away, trying to do what is right, trying to keep the family afloat, trying to make peace between those we love, trying to make ends meet - **WHATEVER** balls we're trying to keep in the air - God says, **“Hang in there and keep going. I'm with you! We can do this together!”**

2. Then there's the promise that all we have lost will be restored.

We have lost so much since the time of Adam, haven't we? As this world has continued on it's path, living outside the rule of the loving God who made us, things have gone from bad to worse.

While there are still things that are beautiful in nature and in human hearts, we nonetheless live in a fallen world, and it's full glory has been marred by sin. Death still comes for every living creature, and evil and corruption have their way at every turn.

Paul tells us In Romans, that all creation groans with longing, waiting for the revelation of the children of God - in other words, waiting for that time when God's kingdom will come in all it's fullness, and all will be set free from bondage to decay, and enjoy the freedom of God's glory.

Everything will be alright!

There was a 14th century mystic called Julian of Norwich. At one point, she was granted a number of revelations from God. Something she couldn't figure out was why God had allowed sin to enter the world in the first place, when he could have prevented it. God answered her question. She wrote this in her journal:

“In my folly, before this time I often wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the onset of sin was not prevented: for then, I thought, all should have been well. This impulse [of thought] was much to be avoided, but nevertheless I mourned and sorrowed because of it, without reason and discretion.

But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: **‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.’**

So it's going to be ok! God has dealt with sin, and all of its consequences! We live in this in-between time, when, in partnership with God, we wrestle with the effects of

sin in the world and in our lives and put right what we can. We'll win some, and we'll lose some, but in all of this, we need to remember those two promises God gave us through Haggai the prophet:

1. God is with us, so we need to hang in there and keep going!
2. God will ultimately restore everything we have lost. He'll put everything right.

Let's pray in the words of the collect:

God of all the living,
in the resurrection of Christ Jesus you have given us the promise of life which death itself cannot destroy:
in the strength of this unshakeable promise,
give us a new heart to live, even now, as your new creation. We ask this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit , one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**