

'I will fill this house with splendour'

A sermon preached at the Candlemas evening service at St Saviour's, based on the Second Service readings (Haggai 2.1-9 and John 2.18-22), by the Rev. Colin Lunt

Introduction

A class of schoolchildren was in here a few days ago, to take in what goes on in a church, and to look around and to ask questions. I explained a bit about our worship and mentioned what I think of as the big four items – font, altar, lectern and pulpit. They went off to have a look round the church. When we re-assembled they came up with some questions. Something that had stood out to one little boy was a brass plaque he came across; another child asked about the stained glass windows. I explained that these weren't essential to the church but that people liked to remember their loved ones, and establish memorials.

Thinking about it later, I reflected that we do have quite a lot of little plaques, lists of names etc. (How many brass plaques are there? I counted 15.) I suppose to a visitor it could seem as though our church building is a memorial to lots of people from the past, and they might think of it as a historical monument. This is not how it would have appeared when it was first built in 1845, brand new.

The Temple and its cleansing

Jesus encountered a problem when he entered the Jerusalem Temple. It had been built around the focus of the tabernacle, God's holy presence. Its staffing and its ceremonies had been designed to serve the Lord, to establish right and reverent practices, and to form a connection between God's utter holiness and the people who were unholy – fallible and foolish. What Jesus found when he entered it was effectively a marketplace where people were more concerned about buying and selling things and making a living, than anything to do with God. We call his actions 'cleansing the temple'. He was trying to re-establish the importance of worship and reverence for God.

The Church

Just as for the Temple in Jerusalem, the purpose of our church building is to worship and revere God. I wonder how its use would seem to those who first built it and worshipped here. As a proportion of the population living in the parish I think only a tiny fraction come now to worship God. Many more see St Saviour's as a landmark, a valued historical building.

In Haggai's day the Temple had fallen into a state of disrepair, neglect, lack of attention and care. 'What's the point of it?' people might have said. But God, speaking through the prophet Haggai, promises to do great things – to shake up the world, to take silver and gold from the nations, and to fill the Temple with splendour. 'The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts' (Haggai 2.9).

It is a marvellous and visionary promise. It must have seemed a wonderful and glorious achievement when this church was first built. But what an inspiring thing to think that its glory could yet be greater than that.

The contemporary scene

Today's religious scene would have been a great shock to the founders of St Saviour's. Christianity has, by and large, become an 'option', a lifestyle choice. Going to church is not a commitment but a preference (or not) to be decided in the light of other interests and demands. The people who built St Saviour's believed that the church they were building would be conducive to worship, commitment and God-oriented lives. Today, however, it seems to be too much to ask for commitment, even to weekly worship, let alone daily. In many churches children have disappeared altogether. The congregations are getting older and the numbers smaller. Are we moving towards buildings uncared for and in decline, rather than expanding and growing? It could seem like that. But there is hope, and much to learn.

Later in Haggai's prophecy strictures are laid on the people about the behaviour of those to be involved in the rebuilding of the Temple. We can't expect churches to grow automatically, but it really does depend on existing members to do the building.

Church growth

A lot of books have been written on what is needed to build the Church of the future. Perhaps you have read some of them. Bob Jackson, a trained economist, experienced parish priest, and pioneer in church growth has written: *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth* (2002), *The Road to Growth: Towards a Thriving Church* (2005), and *Going for Growth: What Works at Local Level* (2006). He is one of the authors of a study course called *Everybody Welcome* (2009) which our PCCs will be studying later in the year.

Another very experienced church leader and missionary is Canon Robert Warren, former Vicar of St Thomas, Crookes, Sheffield, and member of the Archbishops' 'Springboard' team. His book, the *Healthy Churches Handbook* (2004), draws on his experiences on the 'Springboard' team over ten years. Many churches have used this as a tool to assess themselves, and we have previously considered doing so at St Saviour's. It is reported that in Rochester Diocese two thirds of the benefices have worked through the material in this book.

Robert Warren suggests in the book that healthy churches will be strong in seven values, goals and characteristics, which are:

- energised by faith;
- outward-looking focus;
- seeking to find what God wants;
- facing the cost of change and growth;
- operating as a community;
- making room for all;
- and doing a few things and doing them well.

The book contains practical material, including a questionnaire that enables a church to develop a profile of itself and so see which areas require working on.

Challenges for us

We live in challenging times. Decline is not inevitable, but change is. (1) Our society is full of non-believers. These are, mostly, not people who believe in something else, but people who believe in nothing in particular. This lack of belief is actually a help to us as Christians, because we have something positive to offer to fill the vacuum. Many people are engaged in a spiritual search – they try out all sorts of things, various therapies, and treatments, they join in with fads and trends, and are still looking. We have to think how we can connect with them and what we have to offer them. (2) We are fortunate as the state church that many people come to us for baptisms, weddings and funerals. Here are golden opportunities to help them progress on the journey of faith, if we can get to know them, their needs and expectations, their hopes and desires. (3) Children are always asking questions about spiritual matters. All the schools of our parish are welcoming to church connections, both to help them with Collective Worship, with Religious Education and to visit places of worship and understand more about our worship life. The Church of England the other week announced that it was promoting the idea of churches linking with pre-schools, nurseries and toddler groups. We are already doing some of this, and many of the children in our church have come too us through this route. Much more is possible.

Story: St George's, Swallowback

Here's one example:

Ian Silk has been the vicar at St George's Swallowback in the diocese of Lincoln for 16 years and is currently enjoying developing a mixed economy approach to parish life. This year he was delighted that all the different services and congregations that have developed at St George's have grown. In particular, for the first time, they decided to count the regular members of the their newest congregation a fresh expression called, "tea time church". Recording those who attend tea time church made him realize that, "these really are regular worshipping members of the church."

Tea time church developed to respond to the growing number of families who were interested in coming to church but for whom Sunday morning was not a good time. It started with a small core group of a couple of families and has grown. The members of this new congregation have come through the contacts made in the church's preschool, through contacts made at the school gates and through people enquiring about baptisms and weddings and of course through friends of friends as word spread naturally.

The tea time service is held monthly in the church on Sunday afternoons. The format of the service is decided by the children rolling a big fluffy dice which lists the various components of the service e.g. prayer or a song. Each element is prepared in advance but the order is decided by the children, with a little help if the dice keeps landing on the same side! As a result of the growth of the congregation it is likely to need to incorporate baptisms. Also regular members of the tea time congregation have recently been confirmed and this is beginning to make the church think about how to include communion for those people for whom this has become their expression of church.

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Transformation

Bob Jackson's research has shown that younger congregations tend to grow (*The Road to Growth*. 2005. p.23). There can seem to be too much emphasis on numerical growth. Growth is not an end in itself, but it can be a sign of quality. For example, cathedral congregations are showing growth at present – perhaps that is an indication of quality. Let's put it like this: if you were transplanted to the middle of another town a long way away, what would you be looking for in a church? As Christians we shouldn't simply be interested in more people attending, but we should be interested in people being *transformed* by the message of the gospel. Our *growth* and their *transformation* are part of the same process (*ibid.*, p.33).

Conclusion

Haggai had a marvellous vision and a wonderful prophecy, a prophecy of hope and glory. What it centred around was the true and worthy worship of God. That was what Jesus was also concerned about when he cleared the traders out of the Temple.

I enjoy visiting the schools and also welcoming school groups into St Saviour's, but one thing that I find frustrating is that the church is quiet and empty. I feel the church doesn't really make sense without living worship. We are all part of that worship and witnesses to our faith.

So, may our commitment and devotion be worthy of the God who is so great. And may our worship and our work for him draw many others to him in thanks and praise, that the splendour of worship may fill this house of prayer even more than at its foundation, and bring God even greater glory.