

Yesterday was the latest in a great history of holding Garage Sales on our site here. Bob Knox tells me it was the 43rd, and across those 43 garage sales, well over half a million dollars has been raised.

The garage sale is one of the things that St Ives Uniting is famous for – in the local community and across the wider church.

Yesterday's sale continued the tradition of getting together as the church – the body of Christ – with our friends and family, to raise some money (quite a lot of money), to engage with our local community – albeit some of that engagement was some pretty serious haggling – and to have fellowship together.

I worked hard. I had some great conversations – with lots of people from different backgrounds – and different experiences of church.

As people have told me about the history of garage sales here, I've learned that there used to be external stallholders involved, that there were Devonshire teas with the corresponding scones baking efforts, and there was a sausage sizzle. Also, the garage sale used to stay open much later, and the clean up effort afterward lasted well into the evening.

And while no one laments the end of the late finish, as I've spoken to people there has been disappointment that the garage sale is no longer like it once was... or perhaps that we no longer have the resources what we once did.

I think that's a common thought in churches these days – that it's disappointing that we can't do what we once did. I had occasion to visit my last two congregations – at Carlingford and Cherrybrook this week – for very different reasons. I heard fond remembrances of packed Sunday schools, and active youth groups and so on. And I've heard similar recollections from people here, too.

There is a feeling that things, generally, aren't as good as they were. And I think if we look at any objective measure of how the church – the broad church – is going, that's what we learn. If we look at census results, if we look at church attendance, if we look at church finances, or the ability of church members to do what they once did – we learn pretty quickly that things don't seem to be as good as they once were.

Jesus said "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28,30) but so often, being a follower of Jesus doesn't seem to be restful or easy.

In the face of all that, it's easy to be discouraged. It seems we can't make much of a difference, so why bother? It doesn't seem like we'll ever get back to the glory days of full churches and overflowing Sunday Schools and youth groups.

It's hardly the first time the people of God have thought like that though. When they despaired at recapturing the 'good old days'... and when they wondered what difference they could possibly make in the wider world.

Our Old Testament reading today relates to the people of God at such a time.

You might remember a few weeks ago we looked at a reading from Jeremiah, who was God's prophet at the time the Israelite people had been conquered by the nation of Babylon, and King Nebuchadnezzar had taken those citizens most useful to him - craftsmen, teachers, musicians, key leaders and even the king and queen back to Babylon as slaves.

At first, those slaves in exile dreamed of going home soon, but Jeremiah, God's prophet, told them God had a different plan for them. It wasn't what they wanted to hear, but it was the truth.

Jeremiah told the exiles that they must come to terms with their circumstances. In fact, Jeremiah told them that they would be living in exile in for 70 years. They had to face the reality that their generation would die in exile in Babylon. The only hope for contributing to the future of their nation would be through their children and grandchildren.

Sure enough, 70 years passed and the people of God were allowed to return to the promised land. And the prophet Haggai, was there for the people as they returned from exile and began to rebuild.

He, along with the prophet Zechariah, encouraged the people to rebuild the Temple and restore the city of Jerusalem.

The book of Haggai is only 2 chapters long – 38 verses in all. It contains three messages delivered to Joshua who was the High Priest and to Zerubbabel, the Governor of Judah. Those two men represented the respective spiritual and the material interests of the people of God.

These were hard and miserable times for the people of God, but Haggai was a great encourager. He helped people to see God's plan for them, even during dire times. Importantly, he wanted the people to see the correlation between obedience and blessing. The more that people lived the way that God wanted them to live, the happier they would be.

At the time of Haggai's prophecies, the exiles had been back in Jerusalem for around 16 years. When they first arrived, there had been major celebrations: They'd praised God for their deliverance and put all of their efforts into showing, in very practical ways, their gratitude for God's provision. They began to rebuild the temple – Solomon's Temple. And they poured their resources into rebuilding the temple – to recapturing its past glory... but it proved a huge task, a hard task, and within less than a year, their enthusiasm began to wane.

They didn't think they could restore the temple. They despaired at recapturing the 'good old days'... and they wondered what difference they could possibly make in the world.

Does that sound familiar?

Haggai told the people of God that they had lost focus, they'd lost sight of the purpose God had for them. It wasn't really about fixing up a building, instead it was about creating a place for God in their lives, an environment in which the people could live as God's people.

The people had been 70 years in exile, and its very unlikely that there was anyone left who had seen the temple before it was destroyed. I'm sure, though, that many stories had been passed down from generation to generation about the glories of the temple. About how grand it had been. And I suspect that those stories had been embellished a bit over time.

In the face of that Haggai went to the people and asked 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?'

He urges them, even in the face of despair and hopelessness, to be strong. Be strong, Zerubbabel, be strong Joshua, be strong, all you people of the land, and work'. In the face of all the problems and disappointments they have, he urges them to be strong and work.

How is that possible?

Well, says Haggai, 'For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

It's not about your strength, says Haggai, it's about God's strength.

As Jesus says "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matt 19:26) or as Paul says "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13)

There's this great assurance there too: Through Haggai, God says to the people 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

They needed to trust God to look after them. And they could know they could trust God, because of all that God had done for them already: He had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He had brought them back from exile in Babylon.

Having given them that assurance, Haggai tells them of the great things in store: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory.'

This temple, this building that you're constructing, might not be as grand as the temple that Solomon built – the temple you're thinking is beyond your ability. But it's not about the building itself, but it's about what's within: I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord.

Our measurements of success is not like God's measurement of success. God assured them that he was going to enable them to complete the temple, and the temple was going to be just like God wanted. It may not have been as glorious as a building as Solomon's temple had been, but God was going fill the temple with God's glory.

Haggai told the people that God was going to shake the world.

And God had brought the people back to the promised land not simply to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and not just rebuild the temple to house the glory of God, but he'd brought them back to Jerusalem to share the Glory of God. Haggai told the people that what was desired by all nations would come, and would fill God's house with glory.

Similarly, the prophet Malachi (3:1), in one of the last prophecies in the Old Testament tells us that "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple" (Malachi 3:1).

Sure enough, the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple, and Simeon took the child into his arms and praised God – he said "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2: 30-32)

Each of the gospels give us accounts of Jesus teaching in the temple.

So it was that God's glory again filled the temple.

But Jesus also told his disciples that the physical temple would be destroyed: We read in Luke 21:5-6 Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

Of course, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we know that God's glory has moved beyond the confines of the temple. When the Samaritan woman asked Jesus whether God should be worshiped in the temple – as the Jews said – or on the mountaintop as the Samaritans said, Jesus replied that “a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” (John 4:23-24)

In the he last verse of today's reading Haggai tells us “‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

The glory of God revealed in Jesus far outshines the glory of all the temple. Greater glory. But even beyond seeing God's glory, Haggai tells us that God says: “In this place I will give peace” (Haggai 2:9). And through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's peace emanates from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, to this very day.

Yes, things aren't what they once were. And it's easy to become despondent. Jesus warned us that things weren't going to be easy – but he also said he would be with us... and the Holy Spirit would dwell within us. We might long for the 'good old days', but the days yet to come may be even better. And if we can't do what we used to do... then we should be prayerfully thinking about what we can do, to share the hope and peace that Jesus gives.

Because no matter how tired we are, or how difficult things seem. Jesus gives us peace. And love. And hope. Today and always.

Amen.