

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Haggai 1:15-2:9

^{1:15b} on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month. ^{2:1} In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: ² Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, ³ Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? ⁴ 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, ⁵ according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. ⁶ For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; ⁷ and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ The latter splendor 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.

Commentary

Background: *The text tells us exactly when the prophet Haggai wrote: in 520 BC, when the first exiles returned from Babylon to Judah. The Babylonians had been defeated by the Persians in 539. The Persians were benevolent, and permitted (and even helped) Jews return to the Promised Land, although it was only a small parcel of land. God's message delivered through Haggai is a practical one: rebuild the Temple, so God will again have an earthly dwelling place.*

King Cyrus of Persia decreed, and King Darius brought to reality, the return of exiles from Babylon to Judah. The foundation of a new Temple was laid in 536 BC; however, little more was done on it for years. Judah now has three kinds of leadership: "Zerubbabel" (2:2) the administrator, "Joshua" the high priest, and Haggai the prophet. The people insisted that priority be given to building houses for themselves (1:2), that rebuilding the Temple could wait. They live at subsistence level (1:6). Through Haggai, God has told them that this is a punishment for ignoring the Temple. So expedite the rebuilding, so God will have an earthly dwelling place again, where he can be honored! (1:8) This is where the priority should be. If they don't God will send a "drought" (1:11). The three leaders, together with all the people (both those who

returned from Babylon and those who never left Judah), then set to work on reconstruction (1:14). The people's change in attitude is echoed in God's; his message is "I am with you" (1:13).

Now Haggai, on God's behalf, asks: who remembers Solomon's Temple, destroyed almost 70 years ago? (2:3). Do you remember "its former glory", when God in his transcendence dwelt there? It probably has no significance for you. Yet God maintains "I am with you" (2:4), as you rebuild, as he was during the Exodus. His "spirit" (2:5), then seen as pillars of cloud and fire, "abides among you". Using terminology descriptive of the end times (2:6), he says he will intervene in earthly affairs, and fill the Temple "with splendor" (2:7). The new Temple lacks the fine decorations of the old, but "the silver" (2:8), his "treasure" (2:7) will be people of all nations who come to him. The new Temple will be even more filled with God's presence, his "splendor" (2:9); there God will "give prosperity", well-being, blessing and peace.

Reflection

Making the worship and honor and glory of God our first priority: we give the idea lip-service, at least. For the returned exiles, though, to set the rebuilding of the Temple before the rebuilding of their own homes was a real sacrifice. How much are we willing – really – to sacrifice for God?

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

^{2:1} As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. ⁴ He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. ⁵ Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?

^{2:13} But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. ¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Commentary

Background: *Perhaps this epistle was written to combat the idea that the end of the era has come, something the Thessalonian Christians have learned either verbally from a false teacher or from a letter purporting to be written by Paul. It says that certain events will occur before Christ comes again - and these have not happened yet, and may be some time in occurring. It promises that those who persecute members of the community will be punished by God at the end of the era. Scholars debate whether Paul wrote this letter. Strangely, the structure of the*

text is very like that of 1 Thessalonians, which is obviously by Paul, but the key ideas are written in a different style.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul has stated that, when Christ comes again, both the faithful who have died and those still alive will be “gathered together to him”, i.e. Christ. But it seems that a person thinking himself inspired by God (“spirit”, v. 2) or by just saying it (“word”), or in a letter supposedly from Paul (“as though from us”) claims that the new era (“the day of the Lord”) has already dawned, that the future is already here. The author of this book insists that this is not so, that God’s kingdom is still in the formative stage, for certain events must first occur: first there will be “rebellion”, (v. 3, a general revolt against God), and then the “lawless one”, the Devil, the full extent of evil, will be fully seen. But the author thanks God for those who are faithful at Thessalonica, because “God chose you” (v. 13) for admission to his kingdom, to be forerunners (the “first fruits”, v. 13, of the harvest were God’s) of other faithful who will come later, through being set apart for him through the Holy Spirit and through their faith. They will share with Christ in union with God. Paul’s readers are to remain faithful to the doctrines (“traditions”, v. 15) they received verbally and via authentic letters.

Reflection

What role does the doctrine of the church play in your life of faith? What articles of faith are “non-negotiable” for you?

Luke 20:27-38

^{20:27} Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Commentary

Background: The lectionary has remained in the Gospel of Luke since Pentecost. Luke's is a gospel that emphasizes God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and lepers. Women play a more prominent part than in the other gospels. Luke never uses Semitic words; this is one argument for thinking that he wrote primarily for Gentiles.

19:47-48 says that Jesus taught daily in the Temple. The religious authorities “kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do ...”. The Sadducees were religious

teachers who held that only the first five books of the Old Testament, the *Pentateuch*, were authoritative. Not finding mention of life after death in these books, they rejected the possibility of its existence.

In vv. 28-33, seeking to trap Jesus into speaking against the Law, they ask a question about *levirate* marriage (*levir* is Latin for *brother-in-law*): a man *lived on* (in a sense) in his son, so if a man died without issue, his brother was required to marry his widow and give her a son, thus continuing his lineage. “This age” (v. 34) is the current era; “that age” (v. 35) is the era to come, when Christ returns. In God’s kingdom, marriage will no longer exist; those who are admitted into eternal life for their faith (“considered worthy of a place ...”, v. 35) will all be “children of God” (v. 36): this will be their family relationship. They will be immortal and will be like “angels”.

In vv. 37-38, Jesus argues for life after death (and resurrection) from the Pentateuch. In the story of the burning “bush”, God tells Moses: “I am the God of Abraham ...”. Because God says *is* (not *was*), Abraham is alive now. He died, so he must have been brought back to life, resurrected. God is truly “God ... of the living” (v. 38).

Reflection

The Sadducees are attempting to snare Jesus in a lawyerly trap – he escapes their snares, and makes an argument for life after death. What does his promise of “immortality” mean to you?

Responsive Psalter

from **Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21**

^{145:1} I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.

² **Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.**

³ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.

⁴ **One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.**

⁵ On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

^{145:17} **The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.**

¹⁸ The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

¹⁹ **He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.**

²⁰ The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

²¹ **My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.