

Collins Street Baptist Church
November 7, 2010
10.30am

A Vision Worth Believing In
Haggai 2.1-9

On November 27 we Victorians return to the polls. It's our State election and we are required by law to cast our vote; to register our preference for who will lead us in the next term of government. The question I want to explore over three Sundays is what difference our faith makes to the way we vote. Rest assured, I am not about to tell you who you should vote for. Unlike the leaders of some churches, I don't believe it's my role to do so. Besides if I tried, I think you'd just ignore me! However, reviewing the lectionary readings from the prophets for these Sundays, I reckon there's some wisdom here relevant to the challenge we face on November 27. Unlikely though it seems, these three old, bearded men from another time and place—Haggai, Isaiah and Jeremiah—all apparently with the most appalling social skills and no dress sense whatsoever, provide some advice worth hearing. It's not advice about *who* we should vote for, but *how* we participate in the process.

Prayer

To understand today's text from the prophet Haggai, we need a bit of history (there's a timeline in the bulletin that might help you along). In 587BC, the powerful Babylonians invaded Judah. They were a destructive and blood-thirsty lot. They decimated the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported en-mass all the survivors to Babylon. Life as the Judeans knew it was over.

58 years later, in 539, with the Judeans still languishing in Babylon, the Persian warlord Cyrus the Great conquered the Babylonians. Persia became the new ruling power with a very different view of world domination. They were not control freaks

like the Babylonians. They allowed the Judeans and others to return to their homelands, in small numbers at first, but the trickle became a flood. By 522, with Darius I on the Persian throne, all of the Judeans were resettled in Judah and free to set up their own local government. Of course, this new autonomy came at a price; a heavy price. Exorbitant tributes had to be paid regularly to the Persian throne, but in return Judah was allowed its own Governor alongside the reinstatement of its High Priest.

Good though this was for the Judeans, it came with a new set of challenges. There was no financial backing for the resettlement of Judah. Jerusalem lay in ruins; there was drought and famine in the land; they were on their own, crippled under the weight of these tributes owed to the Persians. Life was not what they had expected. In the midst of all the challenges of resettlement, a small group had begun minor work on rebuilding the temple. But the discouragements were enormous. They could barely keep their own households afloat let alone anything more. Despondency set in.

It's into this situation that Haggai speaks. It was a tough call for Haggai: to inspire the people to lift their vision, muster their resources and make the temple the great place it once was. It was a tough gig, but he did it. Single-handedly, Haggai led the people into one of the most significant rebuilding programs in the ancient history of Israel. How did he do it? He recast a vision, a renewed vision of their identity as the people of God. Haggai cast a vision the people could believe in.

I don't know about you, but in the weeks immediately before and after the Federal election, I have rarely felt so dispirited by our political processes in this country or by those who have aspired to lead. I found myself longing for someone to cast a political vision worth believing in, a vision that challenged by commitment to citizenship and inspired my participation. To my mind, there simply wasn't one. To be honest, much of that weary disenchantment carries over in my attitude to the State election. There seems very little to believe in other than the power of self-

interest. I make no judgement here about the qualities of those in public office. I do not know our Premier John Brumby nor I have ever met the opposition leader. This is more a confession about the way I feel. After the prolonged agony of the Federal election, it's hard to find the motivation to participate with any real sense of personal investment. I've never been one for shoe throwing. Truth be told, I am more likely to slip off my shoes, put my feet up and ignore them all. At the end of the day it's just easier to bunker down in my own little world of self-interest; a world where, quite frankly, the demands of family and work are more than enough.

This is surely what the Judeans felt like doing as they stared at the mound of rubble where the temple used to stand. What they really wanted, you see, was a King! They wanted to be a nation again in their own right with their own throne and dominion. They wanted the glory days back, the days when the kings of Judah and Israel ruled their world independently. But those days were gone. Never again would a king rule over Judah. And as they stared at that pile of rubble, they must have thought similarly about their temple. What's the use? It's gone. It's over. The black cloud of cynicism had descended and eaten away at any smidgen of resolve that was left.

What do we do with our disenchantment? The fact it, disenchantment unchecked turns into cynicism. Cynicism erodes and destroys; it never builds. Cynicism is criticism gone bad. At its best, criticism is constructive: it identifies the problems in order to address them. Cynicism does nothing but wallow in its own negativity and along the way corrodes everything it touches. It adds nothing. It's with this in mind that Haggai speaks.

'Who is left among you,' Haggai asks, 'that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now?' It's been 67 years since the temple was destroyed. To have any memory of it, you would have to be in your 70s. Maybe Haggai himself was. 'Is it not in your sight as nothing?' he prods. Haggai begins with the most honest assessment of what is. But then he calls the people to see beyond it: 'Yet

now,' he says, 'take courage for God is with you.' 'Don't give up,' Haggai implores, 'put your hands to the plough and keep believing.'

Notice that Haggai promises nothing about the future enthronement of a king, nothing about the end of the Persian rule, nothing about a new leader who will lead them into the fray. No, he directs their attention to God. 'Take courage,' he says to them, 'for God is with you!' Haggai lifts the people's vision by reminding them that they have a broader frame of reference than just the reality of what is.

This is why cynicism is so out of place in the Christian life. We too have a broader frame of reference. Political leaders come and go; circumstances rise and fall; but through it all this remains God's good world, and we are called by God to be invested in its welfare and its future. Constructive critics we may be. But cynics, disengaged and dismissive? No, not for a moment, for we are people of faith; we are people of God.

In verse 5, Haggai calls the people of Judah back to the original promise of God. 'the promise I made when you came out of Egypt.' Nothing has changed, Haggai says, for nothing about God has changed. Though now the landscape is littered with every reason to be discouraged and defeated, your confidence is in God who exists above, beyond and in the very heart of the circumstances before you.

In the weeks following the Federal election, the actions of two people challenged me. Firstly, Geoff, an old friend of mine—one I have reconnected with on Facebook—wrote to tell me about a personal decision he had made the morning after the election. 'I've decided it is time to do something more constructive about Australian politics,' he wrote, 'than simply stand and watch and vote every three years. I am going to join the Liberals. I know they aren't perfect, but nothing ever is in this life. And maybe I can make a difference.' Though I confess I cringed a little at his party of choice, I wrote back and told him how challenged I was by his resolve. At the very

time I was feeling so disempowered and despondent, he had chosen to step up to the mark and act constructively rather than cynically. He did so as a person of faith.

Secondly, I had been watching with interest the fortunes of Lin Hatfield-Dodds, the Greens candidate for the Senate in the ACT. Lin was here at my induction service back in February, at the time the National Director of Uniting Care Australia and President of ACOSS. Brenda and Lin have been close friends for a long time, and I have, through Brenda, been privy to the very difficult process it was for Lin to surrender her secure and influential national role in favour of running for the Senate, a run that ultimately proved unsuccessful. Lin is a person of deep faith, integrity and great ability. Though routinely advised not to run in favour of her professional security and her on-going role in the church, Lin felt the prompting of God to do so. Hence she stepped up and, as it turns out, paid the price. Why? Because she and many others like her are committed to a broader vision of this world as God's world and one in which they wish to serve.

This election is an opportunity for us to choose engagement over cynicism, and it's a choice as much for the church as a whole as it for the individuals within in. Many of you were here for the recent *Q&A on Collins* when hundreds gathered in this sanctuary for a panel discussion on a Fairer Victoria moderated by the ABC's John Faine. It was a wonderful statement that this church is prepared to engage with critical social issues rather than hide away behind religious rituals and preoccupations. As I approach the State election on November 27, I am challenged by events like these; I am challenged by my friends Geoff and Lin; and I am challenged by the words of God through the prophet Haggai. 'Take courage,' God says, 'work, for I am with you ... my spirit abides among you.' God continues, 'In a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth ... I will shake the nations ... and I will give prosperity to this place.' Whatever and whoever sits on the political landscape, we people of faith know that this city belongs to God; this State is held in God's hands. Our call is to do all we can to ensure its welfare and its future. May that be so. Amen.