

Do You Miss The Mountaintop?

It's quite the thing to have "Motivational" items around your house days. You know - fridge magnets with cute little sayings like "keep it simple", "one day at a time", "first things first". Then there are the posters, the ones with lovely sunset - "let the light of the Lord shine on you", or a grizzly bear hugging a squirrel - "even God loves you".

But did you know there's a company who produce "de-motivational" posters? Posters like -

- "The purpose of your life may only be to serve as a warning to others.
- "If at first you don't succeed, it could be that losing is your way of life"
- "The darkest hour is just before all the lights go out"

But do we really need posters to "de-motivated us"? The sad truth is that it's often easier to be miserable than it is to be happy. We need fifty good reasons to be happy, and only one bad reason to be sad. A slight headache and we believe we have a brain tumour, a small cough and it must be lung cancer. Our brain thinks we're still eighteen, but our body tells us otherwise. I know the feeling, it seems to take me longer and longer to do less and less. Middle aged people give their seat to me on the train. The bus driver lowers the bus before I step on board. And I wonder whether I should renew my driver's licence for another ten years when there's a three year option. We think back to our "mountaintop" experiences in life and wonder where they've gone.

In our reading today from Haggai, Israel was facing a similar kind of discouragement. Seventy years earlier the Babylonians had destroyed the city of Jerusalem and torn down the Temple that King Solomon had built, and the Israelites exiled to Babylon. But years later the Persians conquered Babylon and set them free. Yes, there was much cheering and rejoicing. The returning exiles immediately rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and laid the foundations of a new temple. But for the next 18 years there was no progress with in rebuilding the Temple.

So what was the problem? Had they run out of money? Couldn't agree on a design? Couldn't get council permits? DARE I suggest that the Temple was in

the Synod of Jerusalem and there were forms to be filled in?? It's almost 40 years since Church Union in Australia, and right now WE don't seem to be making progress. Congregations dwindling, property be sold on us – are we stuck, just like the Jews were a couple of thousand years ago?

No, the problem for the Israelites was that they had lost their focus. They'd lost their vision and direction. Worse still they had become preoccupied with thinking about the old Temple, that magnificent structure built by King Solomon. They were living in the past, dreaming of glorious times gone by. Remember the song "By the Rivers of Babylon" - "How will we sing the Lord's song in a strange land"? In exile they couldn't "sing the Lord's song" in a strange land, and now that they were set free, they still couldn't sing that song. Everything was wonderful before those Babylonians and Persians came along. Everything was better in the Good Old Days. Sounds familiar?

Remember the Rev Jones? Yes – he used to pack them in! Every Sunday – full houses. And Mr Smith's choir? 50 voices – sang major choral works every week. The Sunday School was overflowing, the tennis club, the badminton club ... they were the days. How we miss the mountaintops of yesteryear. The problem with the Israelites was that their memories of days gone by had got them down, as they can get us down today.

But then God steps in and raises a prophet, Haggai. I must admit that before preparing today's message I'd never heard of Haggai - well I might have seen the name as I flicked through the table of contents, but that was it. Haggai IS one of shortest books in the Bible – two chapters and less than two pages in my Bible, so no wonder I missed it. But in spite of its brevity, the message is very powerful, and relevant to us all today.

Haggai tells the people to get on with the job. Stop messing about. Stop basking in the glory of days long gone. He says "how many of you are here today who can actually remember the old Temple?" (the old temple had been destroyed almost 100 years earlier) And the people responded to Haggai's sermon with obedience and commitment, and soon God was stirring their hearts to rebuild the temple.

The date on which Haggai gave this message is very important. The twenty-first day of the seventh month in Israel's calendar translates to October 17, 520 B.C.

on our calendar. This was the last day of the week long celebration of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. It was exactly 430 years since King Solomon dedicated the first temple, a magnificent masterpiece of architecture and ornamentation, filled with the most precious metals, gems and craftsmanship from around the ancient world. As the people of Haggai's generation looked at this second temple they were building, it looked like nothing in comparison to the original.

The first temple was built during the golden age of Israel's history. But in Haggai's generation, Israel was occupied by the Persians. Their economy was struggling, and the second temple they were building seemed pitiful in comparison to Solomon's temple. This second temple would never match the glory and greatness of the first temple.

So how do we rid ourselves of discouragement and get a positive feeling back? Well I believe a good starting point is to "Be Honest About The Past".

Yes, 50 years ago Rev Jones was "packing them in", but 50 years ago nothing was open on a Sunday, no shops, no cinemas, no eating places, no Sunday sport (and I'm not saying that's a bad thing) so if you wanted to do something on Sunday, there was only one choice – go to church! Youth groups were thriving. But let's be honest – did I really go to PFA for bible study and to have fun? Or was it mainly to check the girls out!

And don't memories grow fonder as years pass. My father used to rave about this MARVELLOUS place where they used to go camping when he was young. A place surrounded by huge mountains and a rushing river in which they swam and fished. A wonderful place called – Flowerdale! He raved about it so much we badgered him into taking us there. We drove up and down a dusty road trying to find the place, but we couldn't find this grand place called Flowerdale. Then he finally admitted "well -this must be it". Yes, a few surrounding hills, and the King Parrot Creek barely a trickle of water. He was bitterly disappointed. We were amused.

Step 2 – "Turn To God In The Present"

In verses 4-5, God (through Haggai) continues... "Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high

priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.”

So here is another issue that I think we have great trouble with - the source of our strength. Have you ever noticed how often we find people in the Bible being told to be strong?

Moses: “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

Joshua: “Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the Lord do to all your enemies against whom ye fight.”

David’s words to Solomon before he built the first temple: “Be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee...”

And did you notice that in every one of those passages where the people are told to be strong and courageous, there is also the promise of God’s presence. It is His presence that enables you to continue on when you get down and discouraged with what is happening in your life.

Finally Step 3: “Anticipate Glory For The Future”.

In verses 6-9, Haggai continues by looking to the future- “For thus saith the Lord of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts....”

This is Haggai’s message of hope and vision of the future for the Israelites, and they respond.

Our strength and satisfaction comes from God, and sometimes the only way He can get us back up the mountain is to allow us to walk through the valley from time to time, where we can grow and be strengthened.