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Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17, Luke 20:27-38**

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*The Expository Times* 2010 122: 28

DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377052

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ext.sagepub.com/content/122/1/28.citation>

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## 7<sup>th</sup> November: Proper 27

### Set apart for God

*Haggai 1:15b-2:9, Psalm 17:1-9, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17, Luke 20:27-38*

The Expository Times

122(1) 28-35

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DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377052

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These readings pose a question: what do themes involving prophecy, prayer, immortality, and the 'son of perdition', or the Parousia, have in common?

Haggai in his dream of a restored temple, appeals to the prophetic.<sup>1</sup> He shares his vision first with Zerubbabel, the governor, Joshua, the high priest, and then the people. One suspects there is wisdom in consulting in this order so making it possible for his vision to find acceptance.

The prophet appeals to reminiscence and nostalgia.<sup>2</sup> Many today would dismiss these as barriers to progress, apart from the practice of cognitive therapy especially for the elderly and the building of 'how life used to be' museums.

Looking back however is not always a bad thing. Haggai sees the rebuilding as something positive, showing confidence in God's blessings for the future prosperity of his people, and those who are acquiring wealth at this time are able to put some of it to good purpose. Times of prosperity have often being times of building places of religious significance. In Britain, the 'Wool' Churches of East Anglia provided such an opportunity; and the chapels built to meet the spiritual needs of those whose lives were radically changed by the industrial revolution, provided many openings for wealthy 19<sup>th</sup> century entrepreneurs to donate generously.

Haggai's vision for the temple's rebuilding was to revive a focal point of faith. It is not just nostalgia for the return of things as they used to be. They needed a

focus to remind them of their Covenant with the living God. The New Temple will be more splendid than the old.<sup>3</sup> If we are paralleling this with the rebuilding of churches today it would possibly be more user friendly than the old, but Haggai particularly saw the need to provide for a reformed community, more intent on truly following God.

The Psalm reading however moves away from the need for sacred space, and a people purified to use it, to the inner world of prayer, and the personal hurt that someone feels who is wrongly accused. This is the prayer of an individual who is fervently reflecting on his plight, and his plea for justice, who is waiting for God to vindicate his cause.

We often think of the need for justice as a whole to 'roll down like a mighty stream',<sup>4</sup> but here the emotional needs of an individual are pinpointed. He feels surrounded by deadly enemies, 'waiting to pull him down, like lions waiting to tear him to pieces'.<sup>5</sup> He deeply needs to know of God's help, and support and waits to feel a sense of God's comfort 'at his side'.<sup>6</sup> This Psalm reminds us of the commandment against false witnessing, and the terrible hurt it can bring to people who are on the receiving end of dishonest practices.

After reading this passage I found myself questioning my whole approach to the beatitude 'blessed

<sup>1</sup> Haggai 2 v.1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. v.3.

<sup>3</sup> v.9

<sup>4</sup> Amos 5 v.24

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 17 vvs 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. v.17.

are those who desire to see right prevail'.<sup>7</sup> I have always thought of the words of Jesus applying primarily to those who seek social justice for others; the social campaigner and of Jesus speaking encouraging words to those who support all kinds of worthy and forgotten causes.

The words of Jesus however can have another side to them. Those who 'hunger and thirst' for justice can also be those who are suffering the pain of injustice itself. It includes those who need support in their downtrodden and humiliated state. Those who are struggling to keep a sense of true self-worth in a situation where the odds are against them. They wait for the assurance of the closeness of God in their lives. It is to those who are described in this Psalm that Jesus speaks. Comfort is something that Jesus promises to those who suffer and desire to see 'the right things happening'.

The question of individual immortality in the Luke reading is a strange one for contemporary western society which sometimes sees a succession of partnerships rather than the institution of marriage as the norm of relationship, and marriage as just a piece of paper or a legal certificate.

The reply of Jesus to this legalistic, 'after-life' conundrum, however takes us beyond the sanctity of marriage and its eternal significance, important though this may be to Jesus himself, and his own firm views on its life-long nature. 'God, when He takes His faithful ones into fellowship with himself, cannot be thought to limit this purpose to the brief span of his earthly existence, but wills to create an eternal relation and an eternal bliss.'<sup>8</sup>

Men and women 'who are worthy to rise from death and live in an age to come will not then marry.... they are sons of God because they have risen from death.'<sup>9</sup> Notice how 'worthiness', or a sense of living a life obedient to God's will, comes into this eternal aspect of immortality. Jesus's answer to the conundrum presented by the Sadducees made their question completely irrelevant.

Second Thessalonians takes me where I have never ventured before. To use words from 'Star Trek', it is not an area into which I am tempted 'to boldly go'. Those trained for ministry at a time when 'realised eschatology' was very much in vogue,

reflecting the prevailing liberal mood, probably saw little need to visit Parousia passages in the Epistles.

Listening to the sombre reading of these words as a young child however, the 'son of perdition' in the authorised version came over to me as a mysteriously wayward person who was to be defeated when the end of all things came. If we think of the wicked one<sup>10</sup> also as being 'the lawless one',<sup>11</sup> who does not seek God and obey his commands to do what is right; we are likely to see a connection with the other readings. 'The wicked one' epitomises and personifies all that is wrong with human beings, and their often overpowering inclination to do evil. He is also described as the 'Man of Sin' commonly associated with the Antichrist<sup>12</sup> and the Beast of Revelation.<sup>13</sup>

Whilst there is a danger of a kind of dualism which takes evil outside the bounds of God's will, we do need reminding of the intensity and seriousness of evil which is to be subdued at His coming. Jesus is fully recognised as the conqueror of evil; but it's a tight finish. The evil one will even go in and sit down in God's Temple and claim to be God.<sup>14</sup>

This comes as a warning to us that although Haggai was inspired by God to restore the temple and bring God back into focus in society, even the temple can be misused. In the last resort no building in itself can be the means of finding and holding on to God, and the high purpose to which we are called. Only Christ himself has that unique role. The Psalmist's, concern for himself as an innocent person, and St. Luke's reminder that worthiness matters, also play an important part in the way human beings relate to God.

The final verses from the Thessalonians reading however takes us beyond aspects of the Parousia that are hard to understand. The Good News Bible heads the section with the words: 'You are chosen for Salvation',<sup>15</sup> and further reads that we are 'to be saved by the Spirit's power to make you his Holy People'. In spite of the sin that so easily besets us, we are to stand firm, and hold on to these truths. A holy people are more important than a Holy Temple. We are set apart to have an eternally significant role.

<sup>10</sup> 2Thess 2 v.3

<sup>11</sup> Dan 7 and 8

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 2 v.18

<sup>13</sup> Rev 13

<sup>14</sup> 2Thess 2 v.4

<sup>15</sup> 2Thess 2 vvs13-17

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5 v.6

<sup>8</sup> T.W. Manson, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 226.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 20 v.35ff.