



GENEROUS  
ADVENT:  
PREACHING HAGGAI  
INTRODUCTION

# Introduction



## GENEROUS ADVENT

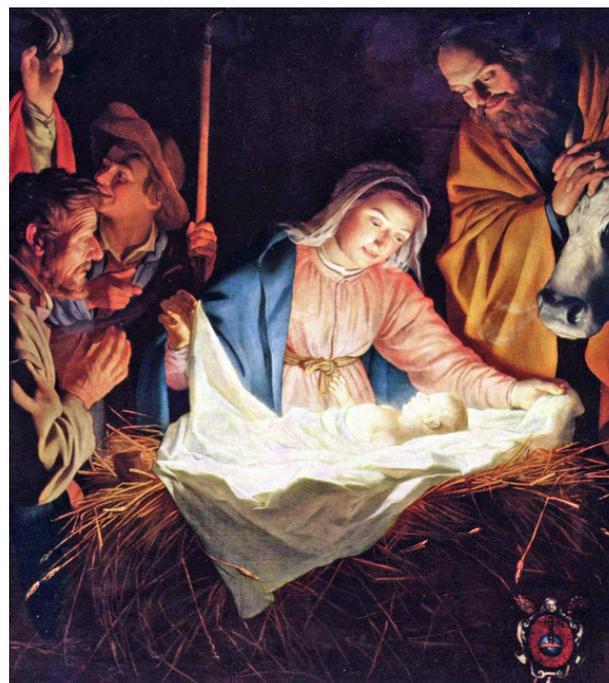
These background notes and sermon outlines exploring generous discipleship in the short book of the minor prophet, Haggai. The materials support two sermons, suggested for the Sunday Last before Advent, (Christ the King) and the first Sunday in Advent.

This preaching resource is part of a wider suite of resources, [Generous Advent](#), which includes themed liturgies and creative prayer stations. A simple 'Stir Up Sunday' all age activity is provided and a more hands-on Jesse Tree activity, for an Advent focus as the Christmas rush builds.

## LOOKING NEAR AND FAR

In his final greetings to the church at Corinth Paul writes, Maranatha, Our Lord Come! (1 Cor 16:22). This can be translated, 'The Lord has come' or as prayer for the Lord still to come. Advent [1] captures the ambiguity of Paul's prayer.

Advent is our season for wearing our spiritual bifocals.[2] We prepare to celebrate the birth at Bethlehem but Advent also challenges to a longer vision. The last Sunday before Advent celebrates Christ the King, teeing up our Advent observance. In hope, expectation and awe we look to the return of Jesus and his Kingdom of grace, truth and justice.



## ADVENT THEMES

Distinctive Advent themes developed across the life of the church and over the centuries.

**Penitence.** It is likely that in some parts of the ancient church baptisms were conducted at Epiphany. The preceding period of prayer, fasting and penitence left its stamp on Advent and purple is the liturgical colour, like Lent.

**Preparation.** Over time the celebration of Jesus' birth settled on 25th December. [1] A time of preparation was in order which retained a penitential element of fasting.

**Promise.** The looking forward to a rich Messianic future in Isaiah and other prophets is reflected in Advent's twin themes of expectation of salvation and God's judgement.

[1] From the Latin, *advenire* meaning to come to

[2] Or as Father Ted put it memorably: *these cows are small, those cows are far away!*

[3] The date possibly linked to the pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun; the season to Saturnalia.

## WHY HAGGAI?

Haggai's active ministry, just shy of 4 months in 520BC, required of both prophet and people the same spiritual bi-focals as our Advent observance.

In the foreground, visible to everyone, was a ruined and partially restored Temple in a Jerusalem paralysed by economic uncertainty. The memory of the 'severe mercy' (Walter Brueggemann) of the Exile still haunted the people. The rich promise of their return to Jerusalem not matched by the daily reality of drought and shortage.

Haggai's prophecy spoke to what lay before the people. The task was to rebuild the Temple. The challenge was to penance and preparation, a change of lifestyle and a reset of their priorities.

Haggai spoke also a promise for a new future. I am with you' Lord (1:13). Be strong... be strong.. for I am with you...my Spirit remains among you...Do not fear (2:4-5). From this day will I bless you (2:19b).

Where some felt disappointment at the new Temple Haggai promised: the glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house. (2:9). He painted a vivid picture of a new future. In a shaking of the nations the gentiles will bring their wealth to Temple, acknowledging God's ownership of and sovereignty over all material things. [1]

## ABOUT HAGGAI

Haggai, is mentioned only in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 outside his own book. Specific dates in Haggai and his contemporary Zechariah (chapters 1-8) enable scholars to pinpoint Haggai's ministry with some precision. His first prophecy is, give or take a day or two, in late August 520BC and his last on 18th December of the same year.



## BACKGROUND TO HAGGAI

Jehoiachin was deposed as king by the Babylonians in 598BC and Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586. Many Israelites were sent into Exile. In 538 Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon. Jewish exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem and to build the temple (Ezra 1:2-4) and some looted Temple property was returned.

Work on the Temple began in 538BC (Ezra 3:10) and the foundations were laid. Work appears to have been disrupted by opposition (Ezra 4:1-5). Cyrus son, the unpopular Cambyses, took the Persian throne in 530, a reign characterised by political upheaval and the military conquest of Egypt. On his death Darius, an army officer, seized the throne in 522BC. His reign brought peace and set the context for Haggai's ministry mentioned, with Zechariah, in Ezra 5:1.

Haggai called Israel to complete the unfinished work on the Temple in Jerusalem. There was much economic uncertainty and the work required the same generous giving of time, talents and treasure that had accompanied the laying of the foundations some 18 years earlier (Ezra 2:68-69, 3:7) along with the resources provided by King Cyrus (Ezra 1:4-6, ). Generosity in tough times is a grace-filled gift (2 Cor 8:1-2).

[1] Permission to freely edit an earlier (2009) version of this material by Stewardship ([www.stewardship.org](http://www.stewardship.org)) is gratefully acknowledged.

## GENEROUS DISCIPLESHIP

As Christians we live out our everyday lives in the space between our Saviour's birth and his coming again. Quite simply, money is an indispensable, all-encompassing part of life. Faithfulness around our money and possessions is a formative part of our discipleship. The challenge and the joy of generous discipleship is to discover what it means to follow Jesus around our money.



In Haggai's day times were tough and in prophetic poetry Haggai posed the problem: You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it (1:6)

His words may seem a little harsh or a lot unreasonable. Many, perhaps most, were just about coping while doubtless some were doing OK. Haggai is not criticising the need for life's essentials. But he knows, as our stewardship ministry should know, that money has a gravitational pull on our lives.

Deep impulses and fears shape our money stories, as individuals and as a church. Economic insecurity makes us fearful and defensive. Money anxiety is corrosive of our hope and happiness. Haggai's words also portray something of the discontent at the heart of a more affluent society. As advertising and the lifestyles around us stir discontent growing affluence eats away at contentment. We lose the capacity to wait, to defer gratification. We don't believe money brings happiness but a little more would make me a little happier.

Like the rich fool (Lk 12:13-21) we lose sight of God and the community of which we are a part. Nehemiah had to speak prophetically into the injustices within the community of Jerusalem – and model a different way of living (Neh 5:1-18). Without intent God's claim on all of our life is pushed to the margins until we have nothing at the centre.

## IF YOU BUILD IT, HE WILL COME

Haggai's proposal was counter-intuitive. He called the people to invest energy, time, talents and, yes, money in rebuilding the Temple. This was not a vanity project for king, priest or people. Haggai is not concerned only with a building but with rebuilding a community with a cohesive social, moral and spiritual centre. Rebuilding the temple was a declaration of identity. It was a choice to put God at the heart of Israel' worship, social, moral and economic life.

Generosity, the work of the hearts and hands of God's people, is ultimately framed in Haggai as a lifelong stewardship lifestyle not a focused capital fundraising project. But churches often find witness that the generosity that resources a shared capital project transforms congregation life.

The financial crisis of 2008 with its infectious greed and risk taking bonus culture shows what happens when wealth creation has no moral centre. The poorest are often the silent victims, shaken afresh by a post pandemic cost of living crisis.

## AN ADVENT INVITATION

Advent calls us to faithful living between the first and second coming of Christ. Haggai invites us to consider what faithful living means when it comes to managing that gravitational pull of our money and our possessions.

Our journey into generous discipleship is not easy and it's not cheap. It means putting God's priorities first and honestly examining our own. It means recognising that God is the owner and the giver of all we have: the silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the Lord (Hg 2:8). It means that God must be at the centre of our personal and our shared lives and must touch all we have: our spending and saving, our planning and our borrowing and, yes, our generous giving.

But this is a journey into generosity which we share together. We travel as the people of God. We journey into generosity under the promises of God: Be strong... for I am with you... and my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.' (Haggai 2:4).

