

“I will shake the heavens...”

A call to remember the past. That is how the second chapter of Haggai begins. In a troubling moment in time – to a people scattered and defeated – with the temple in ruins and nothing about the future suggesting hope – comes a reminder that the ‘good old days’ are well and truly distant. But...

Take courage, says the Lord (through the prophet). Take courage and remember what is possible because of my promise. Be encouraged because my spirit abides in you, and Do. Not. Fear.

What follows are words that often enough strike fear into us. “I will shake the heavens and the earth; the sea and the dry land; and I will shake the nations...” Not many of us associate that kind of language with good news. But the promise of all this shaking is grounded in this oft forgotten fact; it’s God’s to shake up. It’s God’s to rearrange. It’s God’s to do with as God pleases.

Too often...way too often – we have imagined that history and destiny are things that we control. God knows we’ve tried – and in God’s name, too.

Too often we fall victim to our own enthusiasm for change according to our narrow, selfish and limited understanding of the world and all that is in it. And on this Sunday in November, as we are reminded of the misery of human attempts to establish rights or avenge wrongs, it is important that the prophet offer us his history lesson.

Our seemingly endless appetite for conflict is dampened when we pause and pray to be reminded of the lives lost and altered – of the devastation of war – of the lingering suspicions that remain long after the ‘peace’ we

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sought has been negotiated. And it is true that much of what we have done has been justified (and occasionally glorified) through the language of faith. We have, we must confess, styled ourselves “agents of God’s justice” in any number of conflicts - indeed the earth, skies and seas have been mightily shaken by our efforts – and the prophet calls us to remember the only one who has a right to shake things up.

Such shaking ought never be a cause for fear – God’s aim is glory, splendour, and prosperity for all (not just the victors). God’s desire is always to remind the creation of the power and love that the Creator possesses. God’s activity invites cooperation rather than demanding blind obedience. God’s promise is gently persuasive. And our attempts to shape our world according to that model – acting as we do on God’s behalf (rather than as God’s partners) lead to conflict, confusion and the wrong kind of shaking.

Case in point: a question about resurrection (posed by those who deny resurrection) comes to Jesus, whose every word and every act suggests that God’s power to act defies our definitions and expectations...

‘Teacher, if resurrection is a possibility, explain this thing that seems, to us, impossible...’

The ‘problem starts like a poorly told joke – an unfortunate woman is widowed seven times (and also childless – therefore as bereft of status, or legacy, or protection as a person could be) – and finally, predictably, she also dies. The punchline? Whose wife is she?

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Jesus derails this sad tale of human expectation and human misery with good news about the real power of God. Life and death are not barriers to God, just to our imaginations. Even the dead are alive to God (says Jesus) so your question serves no purpose. Your definitions of power, privilege – rights and responsibilities – have no meaning before God, whose power encompasses all these things. Whether or not the Sadducees were convinced of the reality of resurrection, they must have learned something of the reality of God – the truth about power – the illusion of human control.

So today, as we remember the past - as we honour the lives lost and acknowledge the wastefulness of war - we would do well to remember the prophet's call. Before we engage in arguments about whose cause was (or is) the 'just cause', we should try to measure those arguments against Jesus words to the Sadducees. Before we ever again imagine that it was God who was on our side - in any of our endless conflicts - we had better examine whether or not we think that God works for the destruction of one over the other.

It's not how we're used to thinking - but that's the point. Jesus way is not the usual way. He is leading us against the grain of our broken existence, back into the path of God's glorious way. It is a path that includes conflict differently managed, and forgiveness generously applied. The path we take when we chose to follow Jesus leads through the cross - the most desperate and horrible of places - and that is an experience that liberates us from the way of the world.

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Yes, I am grateful for those who choose to serve - my uncles - my cousin; my newest son-in-law is even now pursuing a career in the Canadian Armed Forces. I'm grateful for those who served and “counted not the cost” - but I am also well aware that once we go down the road to armed conflict, there is no stopping. The ‘peace’ we find at the end of war is uneasy and incomplete. According to our rules, it only lasts until someone stronger comes along.

But we have chosen to follow Jesus - who points us to the one who cannot be conquered - who has no fear of any challenger - whose very nature is love. On that path lies peace; perfect peace. May we learn that lesson. May it soon be so.