

*HAGGAI.*

WHEN Cyrus, king of Elam, and conqueror of Media and Persia, overthrew Nabonidos, and made Babylon the seat of his empire, one of his first acts was to liberate the Jewish captives and encourage them to return to their own land. This he did for purposes of State. As his dominions extended he saw the necessity of attaching subject nations to his government by gratitude and self-interest. He also perceived that in operating against Egypt it would be of great importance to have Judæa as a secure base of these operations. But the vast majority of the Jews preferred to remain in exile. Already the race had learned its adaptability and power to outstrip other races, even on their own soil. Already many of them, such as Daniel, had won their way to posts they could not abandon. Many had acquired property they were disinclined to sell, had originated business they could not transfer, had formed connexions they could not easily sunder. Besides, the grandeur of Babylon fascinated them. Its gates had indeed been thrown open to the conqueror. It was not, after all, impregnable. But this one misadventure could not delete from the Jewish mind the impression that in all the world there was no magnificence comparable to that of Babylon. To abandon its thronged and affluent streets, its gay gardens, its stupendous buildings, its busy river lined with quays and storehouses, its secure and easy ways of living, and to betake themselves through many perils to the ruins of a small town overgrown with grass, its entire trade destroyed, the country round it at all times hilly and barren, and now utterly waste, was a course of conduct which, considering what human nature is, was not likely to be adopted by any large number of men.

That 42,360 men with their dependants availed themselves of the decree of Cyrus, and returned to their own

land, is a strong testimony to the intense hold which the fatherland asserts over some races, and also to the belief which many Jews still held that there awaited their race a glorious destiny, and that this destiny must be accomplished in their own land. Long captivity had not in all the Jews deadened the spirit of freemen. Their psalmist, even among strangers, and though the brand of the slave was upon him, exclaimed, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let skill depart from my right hand; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." The man who thus nobly preferred to hang his harp on the willow that seemed to droop its head and weep in sympathy with the exile, rather than desecrate his art by making it the pander to profane mirth, who imprecated upon himself the loss of his gifts of art and song if his heart should prove unfaithful to Him who gave them, is a type of man who reminds us how much salt remained among the Jews in their most corrupt times. Rare indeed among us is this pathetic fidelity to our true home; rare this noble scorn of "them that waste us" when we are invited to use, for the purpose of ingratiating ourselves with the influential, or promoting the unworthy pleasure of the worldly, gifts entrusted to us for accomplishing purposes that are Divine. Too common among us is a slavish contentment to remain in well-fed exile, with little earnest craving to return to the presence and dwelling of God, and little hardy and daring ambition to go where alone our destiny as God's children can be worked out.

Dreary enough was all that met the eye of those who returned; and never had men more need of faith. They saw the houses weather-worn and in decay, the once trim gardens undistinguishable, the wide cornfields lying like unreclaimed land. And when at length they reached what had been Jerusalem, and walked in over the crumbled

walls, the young people, who had been told of its glories, must have exclaimed in disappointment, as their eyes rested on gables blackened with fire, the Temple demolished, everywhere heaps of ruins. It seemed unreasonable to expect that out of their small numbers a nation could grow, or that out of these piles of grass-grown and beast-haunted ruins a fair and prosperous city should arise. Still, when the first shock had spent itself, and they had time to reflect that this was actually the land in which all the great deeds of their fathers had been done; when they found themselves standing where David and Solomon had stood; when with their own eyes they saw one after another of those historic scenes on which the fancy, the patriotism, the godliness of their childhood had been nursed; and when they felt that to be free under any conditions is better than to be captive under any,—they must have felt a thrill of unaccustomed joy and have gladly joined with their choir of two hundred singing men and singing women as they sang, “When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were as men that dream.”

Their difficulties however were by no means over when they reached Jerusalem. In the first year of Cyrus, the year 538 B.C., they celebrated their return by erecting an altar of burnt offering, and shortly after made preparations for rebuilding the Temple and the city walls. But their contemptuous rejection of the proffered aid of the Samaritans roused the jealousy of that mongrel race, whose leaders so misrepresented matters at the court of Cyrus that further building was interdicted. It was not to be expected that Jewish affairs should receive any attention from his successor, the eccentric or mad Cambyses, still less from the usurping Smerdis; but no sooner was Darius Hystaspis firmly seated on the throne than the men who understood the times perceived that the Jews' opportunity had arrived. Roused by Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel took heart

and resumed the work of rebuilding Temple and city in the second year of Darius (B.C. 520), and in less than four years the top-stone of the Temple was built in amid the acclamations of men who felt themselves once more a nation.

The men who take the initiative in a national crisis such as this must have words to utter which, however flat they may appear to us, are well adapted to the occasion. And the probability is, that in these brief remains of the prophets we have but one or two specimens of a ceaseless activity and persistent determination which upheld and animated the whole people till the work was accomplished. It was not an easy task they took in hand. The return from exile had its dark as well as its bright side. It was a second exodus, from which the nation might be expected to start with a cleansed path and a new purpose. But as in the individual life, the chastened penitent, purified as his spirit may be, has in some cases no longer the material or the physical means of showing what this life should be: so the Jewish nation, purged as it was from idolatry, had yet lost its opportunity, and henceforth drags out a poor and insignificant career, in great part unrecorded, and with barely one great man to the century. The great result of the succeeding five centuries probably was that the hopes of the true Israel became spiritualized. At all events, this inglorious period paved the way for the ultimate acceptance of a spiritual Messiah, and not an earthly monarch. And whatever was the result, there is no doubt of the fact that, from the period of the exile, things have no longer the old life and glory among the Jews. To the whole national state the question of Haggai was relevant: "Who is left among you that saw this house in its first glory? And how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison as nothing?"

This changed aspect of affairs was felt to be most discouraging. It is a sad thing, people feel, to be going back

in the world, to be put to shame by the very ruins of our forefathers' works. It is sad for a nation, once the arbiter among the rest, to be now despised and overlooked as insignificant in any great question or contest. It is sad to visit lands which once gave law to the world in art or literature, and find the present inhabitants unable so much as to appreciate the works of their ancestors. It is sad for an individual to become aware that age, instead of bringing him nearer to perfect attainment, is carrying him away from it into destitution, difficulties, feebleness, and failure. It called therefore for boldness on Haggai's part to affirm in the face of the old men, who knew what a change had taken place, that the glory of the house he summoned them to build would be greater than that of Solomon's Temple. Yet if a just estimate of God and His glory had at all found entrance into their minds they might be prepared to believe in their future; for God ever goes forward and not back, accommodating Himself to the world He works in, and passing from stage to stage of progress, never so baffled that He is forced to suspend progress, but always leading His people on to something higher than they have yet attained. Often indeed progress is not apparent. Like these Jews, old men are for ever weeping that the world is not what it was, that a glory has passed from it. These Jews knew what their glory had been in times past, and the new and higher glory of this second Temple, being different from what they had before known, they could not recognise as glory at all. So it is always. When the special glory or privilege of a generation passes away, there are many to lament its decay, but few to recognise the higher good to which it has given birth and which now takes its place. Be it ours to have faith in God, to believe that He goes on. The work we have to do may reflect no great glory on those who do it; but it may, and by God's blessing it will, be a step onwards. Let us not think

meanly of our own generation. It also has a place in the history of God's purposes and work in the world.

To inspire the people with energetic hopefulness was Haggai's object. And standing among the abandoned foundations of the Temple, he cries to those around him, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, saith the Lord of hosts"; and in what this greater glory was to consist he explains by adding, "In this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts." Any outward glory the building might have was to be merely suggestive of the real glory that attends God's presence. The Church can at no time compete with the world in what is distinctively the glory of the world. The Golden House of Nero ever eclipses Solomon's Temple. The raising of large sums of money, the adoption of high-sounding ecclesiastical titles, the maintenance of striking services, the glitter of processions variegated with picturesque and gorgeous dresses and banners, the employment of political and social influence—all such things merely exhibit the Church as a kind of second-rate world. The spiritual men among the Jews were drawn to the Temple because they were men like ourselves, often feeling forlorn and strangers upon earth, and seeking a Father's dwelling-place. Tortured by the temptations to which their circumstances gave rise, and by the disappointing wickedness of their own hearts, the prey of gnawing anxieties and doubts, feeling keenly that the mere possession of their own land was far from giving them true settlement of spirit, they found in the dwelling of God the peace they longed for. Where God manifests Himself as dwelling with men to bless and keep them, there peace abides. It is peace that Christ brought by bringing the Father among us, and by revealing His forgiveness, His purpose to lift us out of all sin, His identification of Himself with us. He who believes in Christ as the revelation of God enters into peace.

But how was this glory of God's dwelling to be reached? How was even the external building to be erected? It was through utter discouragement, through interdict and withdrawal of countenance on the part of their rulers, and through the opposition of their neighbours, that they had abandoned the works; how should they resume them? This second exodus they had found markedly different from the first. No pillar of cloud and fire had guided their return; no easy discomfiture of foes, no supernatural supply of their wants, had encouraged them. On the contrary, they were a derision and a hissing to those that saw them. Nothing seemed to thrive with them. Their crops failed; the money carefully amassed in Babylon was rapidly spent at home. They might justly question whether God was blessing the enterprise.

At this juncture come Haggai's words: "I am with you, according to the word that I covenanted with you, when ye came out of Egypt, so My spirit remaineth among you; fear ye not." This was great encouragement indeed. It was great encouragement to these returned exiles to know that, notwithstanding all that had come and gone since the Exodus, they might serve themselves heirs to all the promise and hope of that glorious time. All men have to learn that, not upon their steadfast will and consecrated life does the world depend for its redemption from evil, but upon God's faithfulness to His original purpose. We fail; we utterly forfeit our right to put a hand to any holy work; we earn banishment and exile, loss of influence, and of all true fellowship with God; but every one who penitently and humbly seeks again to advance any good thing is met by God's forgiveness and countenance. This is the strength of all who see good that needs to be done and are striving to do it, that God is with them, consistent with Himself, ever bearing things onwards towards a righteous end, and carrying with Him all who labour in that cause.

This fundamental encouragement is flanked by the further assurance that the means required for the work will not be wanting. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord of hosts." That is to say, the silver and the gold at present held by those who are not thinking of this work, the money not as yet available for it, the means which must be forthcoming if the work is to go on, but of which at present there is no offer, promise, or sign—all this is Mine. It is now held by men, some of them niggardly, some of them resolved upon other investments, some of them unaware that this work is going on; it is held by persons who look upon it as theirs, and who are destining it to uses of their own: but it is really Mine, and what you need I will give. The work I wish to see done I have the means of doing. Your part is to determine if the work is needed, and to seek the means in legitimate ways. Visionary as such a statement may seem, abundant and remarkable verifications of it occur continually: verifications which, it must be confessed, make it extremely difficult to redd the marches between faith and imprudence.

Money however is by no means all that is required for furthering good work upon earth. Therefore God promises other requisites as well. "I will shake all nations, and all that the nations count desirable shall be brought." Very slowly indeed is this being fulfilled. Indications of fulfilment may be detected here and there; but that is all. The highest art of southern Europe has at times been consecrated to Christian uses. The enterprise, the zeal for exploration and discovery, which chiefly characterize northern Europe, has helped forward the cause of freedom and religion. By many social changes and by some political movements the best interests of humanity are served. How far social reform and national law can help to make men moral is a question not to be settled without debate and explanation. That men cannot be made Christian by



compulsion needs not to be insisted on. But men can be restrained from outward acts of immorality; and it will scarcely be doubted that if through three or four generations of a nation's life some forms of immorality were made impossible, the tendency towards such immorality would be enormously lessened. And if a nation represses crimes which *directly* injure the life and property of the citizens, it is difficult to see why it may not assume or exercise the right to repress such vices as indirectly but most seriously affect that life and property.

But Haggai was aware that the reluctance to build arose largely from discontent with their lot. Their harvests had been poor; they could earn little, and what they did earn seemed to go into a bag with holes. They had sacrificed, but no response in providence was apparent. The smoke ascended regularly from the altar of burnt offering, but their fields were barren as ever. Why then rebuild the Temple? If no good came of sacrificing, why sacrifice?

Their past want of success Haggai explains by a parable. They thought their prayers and sacrifices should have compensated for their neglect of the great work of rebuilding the Temple. Haggai shows them that this neglect had contaminated all they did. A holy thing, such as a priest's skirt, does not communicate its holiness to what is unclean, does not purify it. On the contrary, what is unholy or unclean does communicate its uncleanness to all it touches. A single decayed apple, left in a basket of sound fruit, will not be turned into a fresh apple by the soundness of the rest, but will propagate its own rottenness through the whole basketful. One drop of dirty water will taint a whole glassful that was fresh and pure. Similarly when a bad man engagés in a good work, it does not purify him, but he defiles it. The Jews, like the great mass of mankind, thought their sacrifices and services would compensate for their sloth, and cleanse their evil lives. They declined

to see that their prime duty was to rebuild the Temple, and that while that remained undone prayers and sacrifices were defiled and an abomination to God. They persuaded themselves the time for building had not come. They magnified the least obstacle, and construed it as an intimation in providence that for the present the work should be suspended. They found opportunity for the elaborate decoration of their own houses. No Samaritan intrigues were allowed to put a stop to that. But a slight rise in the price of timber, a wet season, the sight of a Samaritan a mile from the walls was enough to make them despair of getting God's house finished. And yet they wondered that God did not answer their prayers, and respond to their sacrifices with manifold blessings.

Haggai by his parable showed them that their religious services did not compensate for their neglect, but that, on the contrary, their lack of zeal for God had vitiated all their sacrifices and prayers. Holy services do not cleanse unholy persons. The inward repentance which discovers and repairs neglected duty can alone do that. Your niggardliness, says Haggai, is the source of your poverty. To the churl God shows Himself inexorable and unkind. To the liberal man God shows Himself liberal. Read, says Haggai, the lessons of your own experience. Look back, and recognise that all your misery has come of your neglect of prime duties. Your prayers have been unheard, because you remained impenitent and would not attempt these duties. But from this very day, on which your repentance expresses itself in duty recognised and performed, your prayers will receive abundant answer. Note this day; there is as yet no natural sign, no rich blossom, no augury of the fields by which any one could predict a good harvest; "the seed is yet in the barn, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, the olive, have none of them blossomed," but "from this day will I bless you." The sure omen of good to you is your

laying the foundation of the Temple. From this day, when you faithfully own duty and unselfishly discharge it, you will find God in the midst of you.

Let the idea, then, that religious services sanctify common life, and atone for daily transgression and neglect, be numbered among exploded superstitions. The person who offers the service gives character to the service : and if the person is unholy and impenitent, the service is insulting and impious. To come into God's presence conscious that we have sinned, heartily repentant, and eagerly purposing amendment, is acceptable to God. But to offer to God something that is called religious service, and to do so under a vague impression that this service somehow atones for or covers up the blemishes, the shortcomings, the selfishness of our life, is both ignorant and wicked.

Let it also be understood that frequently God is waiting for us to act, when we are waiting for Him. If we have not been prospering, if our affairs have mysteriously been going back, if loss has followed loss notwithstanding our efforts and prayers, if there seems to be some insuperable barrier to our moral growth, it is very possible this may result from some neglected duty, which convicts us of disloyalty to God. The crime of these Jews was that they put themselves first, God second. They never doubted they had a perfect right to make themselves comfortable, in the first place ; and if there should be a surplus for which they could find no use, that might be given to God. It is thus men destroy their spiritual prosperity, and find themselves becoming heartless in prayer, and conscious that the life has gone out of their religion. To such Haggai's message is : Try a new course ; do not think so much of your own comfort, but be bountiful Godwards. Take note of the day you begin to do so, and you will find that from that very day things begin to go better with you.

MARCUS DODS.