

Sermon Shaking and the Unshakeable
Haggai 2:6-9 Hebrews 12:18-29 Julian Templeton
St John's Church, New Barnet 21 August 2016

I noticed that the handles of the doors of the pantry cupboard had a wooden spoon inserted through them. When I asked my cousin, Pat, why she had done this, she explained that when the big earthquake happened in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2011, items of food in glass jars had fallen out of the pantry cupboard, had smashed, and made a terrible mess on the kitchen floor. The wooden spoon inserted through the cupboard handles would hopefully prevent this happening when the next big earthquake came. For it is very likely that more big earthquakes will shake Christchurch, it is only a matter of when. The challenge is to try to make houses earthquake-proof. The wooden spoon through the door handles is one of Pat's preventative measures. As she herself admitted, though, she was let off lightly: 185 people died in the earthquake. And the psychological after-effects on people who experienced the quakes are still being felt, especially by children, including some of Pat's grandchildren, for whom the very ground beneath their feet is no longer always solid or dependable.

Our planet, with its land-masses, oceans, mountains, ravines and craters, is living testament to an ongoing shaking as tectonic plates move and asteroids collide. This ball of magma we call Earth with its hardened crust and breathable atmosphere, rotating and orbiting in space, is always moving and changing and shaking.

The shaking that the Prophet Haggai and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews write about, however, is different than an earthquake caused by tectonic plate movement. It is the metaphorical shaking of human life by change and testing circumstances; a shaking that God seems to allow and even to use for his eventual good purpose. Haggai writes:

The Lord says, in a little while from now I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land. I will shake all the nations.

Haggai 2:6-7

This passage may strike a chord of recognition for those familiar with Handel's oratorio: *Messiah*. One of the Bass solos is a setting of these same words from Haggai, in which Handel writes long quivering melismas on the word "shake", illustrating in music the Lord's shaking of the nations.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews comments on this same saying from the prophet Haggai:

[This] point(s) to the removal of all created things, of all that is shaken, so that what cannot be shaken may remain. The kingdom we are given is unshakeable...

Hebrews 12:26-28

"The Letter to the Hebrews was [probably] written at a time when yawning chasms seemed to be opening up under the feet of Jewish Christians who watched with despair the familiar and well-loved landmarks of the old religion being swept away."¹ Perhaps the separation between synagogue and church had already taken place. Perhaps, cataclysmically, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. If so, Jewish Christians may well have felt, as Marx and Engels felt and would write much later, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned." (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1848)

What had they to cling to in the midst of so much change and disruption? Arguably, all that the infant church had to cling to was their 'faith alone' in Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews argues that Jesus Christ is the 'once and for all' sacrifice who makes temple sacrifices redundant. By trusting in Jesus's self-sacrifice on the cross, we may approach God "...with confidence, by the new and living way he has opened for us, through the curtain, the way of his flesh." (Heb. 10:19-20)

¹ Colin Morris, *Things Shaken - Things Unshaken*, 153, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006

² Morris, *Things Shaken - Things Unshaken*, 157-8

³ See Morris, *Things Shaken - Things Unshaken*, 156

⁴ See Andrew Shanks, *God and Modernity: A New and Better way to do Theology*, London:

In Gospel According to Matthew, the moment that Jesus dies on the cross coincides with the curtain of the temple being ‘torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shakes, rocks split, graves open and God’s saints are raised from sleep.’ (Matt. 27:51-2)

What Matthew may be trying to depict here in story-form is that “...in crucifying Jesus the ‘powers that be’ imagined they were doing one thing; in fact they were being used to accomplish another. They became instruments of the God who shook the tomb until it fell apart and let loose his great agent of change into all the world and for all time.”²

Similarly, the author of Hebrews may not merely be observing that everything changes—so you’d better get used to it—but, more daringly, it is *God* who does the shaking. And God shakes not only the bad and shoddy, which soon falls apart; *God also shakes what is good*. Yes, even the good and the best are not immune from God’s shaking-down. This might help us to approach that age-old conundrum—why do bad things happen to good people?—from a new perspective. It would suggest that God might be taking the high-risk strategy of searching for people from every era in history capable of withstanding shaking, because he wants to find those who are capable of bearing the weight of divine glory.³ If so, nothing escapes this shaking, winnowing, purifying, filtering action. Indeed, only that which comes through this process proves itself to be good. Like the gold-miner panning and filtering sand and stone in order to find tiny flecks, and very occasionally a nugget, of gleaming gold. So God exposes everything to the waters of purification and change.

The United Kingdom has arguably exposed itself to an indefinite period of change and upheaval in the recent narrow vote in favour of leaving the European Union. When I was out delivering leaflets in favour of the UK remaining in the EU, a woman, who I estimate was in her late 70’s or early 80’s, said to me: “You’re too young to remember what a wonderful place England was in the 1970’s.” First of all, I was flattered that she thought I looked as young as that! In fact, I was a

² Morris, *Things Shaken - Things Unshaken*, 157-8

³ See Morris, *Things Shaken - Things Unshaken*, 156

child in the early 1970’s, but in New Zealand, not England. Her comment struck me then, and has struck me even more forcibly in the wake of the referendum result. Perhaps what she and the majority of her peers who voted to leave the EU wanted was not merely, as one journalist put it ‘to book a one-way ticket on a coach to nostalgia’; but rather they longed to return to the more solid certainties of British self-sovereignty and to an earlier, more predictable England where one could assume that one’s neighbours shared a set of common values and aspirations.

I have heard similar views expressed about Church life. I’ve heard some of you reminisce: ‘Remember when the Junior Church was large, when there was an active youth group, when we put on children’s holiday workshops and musicals and had church away-weekends.’ For reasons I can completely understand, there is a yearning to re-visit those ‘glory days’ when church life was so much more reliable and seemed so robust.

I say ‘seemed so robust’, for what I hope we can agree on is that there has been a tremendous shaking and changing in social attitudes. It seems that in the UK many of the mainline churches have been ill equipped to adjust to the changed realities of life in the last two decades. To give just one example: baptisms, marriages and funerals used to be rites of passage for which most people would look to the church to assist them. Today far fewer people are having their children baptised, most are choosing to co-habit rather than get married, and funerals now take place almost exclusively in crematoria chapels with a token cleric brought in to perform the ritual only when all other options have been exhausted.

In marriage, in family life, in the status of women, in the demands of work, and in attitudes toward religion, a tremendous shaking and changing has taken place in people’s attitudes and practices. Such shaking has been widespread and transformative. Some change has been for the good. Compare attitudes towards the physically disabled and those with learning disabilities in the early 1970’s to now. As the Paralympic Games will soon demonstrate, there is far more awareness and support now to enable those with disabilities to live fulfilling lives. Some change has not been for the good. Who in the

1970's would have predicted that the occasional soup kitchen would morph into a nationwide network of foodbanks for those who cannot afford to feed themselves and their families?

The mention of foodbanks, many of them church-led initiatives, is an example of 'the solidarity of the shaken'. The phrase 'the solidarity of the shaken' comes originally from the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka, (founder member and spokesperson of Charter 77 with Václav Havel). The British Anglican priest and theologian, Andrew Shanks, has adapted it to argue that *all people* who have been shaken by testing events in life should stand together and make common cause.⁴ For the churches, standing together and making common cause means forming new alliances with people outside the church. In fact, with the church's now almost total lack of contact with people through the traditional 'rites of passage', such alliances are arguably one of the main means of contact with people outside the church in addition to people's personal contacts with friends and neighbours.

Such alliances that we form and friendships we make with people through St John's Church's support of Causeway, the Chipping Barnet foodbank, and the Together in Barnet Winter Shelter give us an opportunity as Christians to support the shaken, and to confess that *we too are not exempt from shaking*. What helps us to endure is God's grace, and the support and fellowship of the Church. I remember one woman who came to the foodbank with her mother, and I could sense how uncomfortable and ashamed she felt by having to ask for food. I talked them both while the other volunteers prepared the bags of crisis food. It became apparent that they were both Christians. I offered to pray for them. We joined hands round the table while I offered a prayer for God's help in their need. When we finished the prayer, the bags of food were ready. With tears in their eyes the two women thanked us for our help. They were able to replenish some essential items in their pantry cupboards. There was probably more shaking to come for them both, but the solidarity and practical help we had shown them can be likened to a wooden spoon inserted through the

handles of a pantry door. We are all shaken by change, but God's grace expressed in practical support prevents us from being smashed by change. Let us stand in solidarity on God's promise: 'The Kingdom we are given us is unshakeable.'

⁴ See Andrew Shanks, *God and Modernity: A New and Better way to do Theology*, London: Routledge, 1999; and Shanks, 'The Solidarity of the Shaken', 185-6 in *The Many Faces of Individualism*, Anton van Harskamp and Albert Muesschenga (Ed's), Leuven: Peeters, 2001