

Sermon for Sunday, 23rd August 2020

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Nehemiah 2

Good morning and welcome to the second in our series from the Old testament book of Nehemiah.

We heard last week how the Jewish nation were in exile in Babylon. The city of Jerusalem and the great temple, that Solomon had built, had been destroyed in around 587 BC. Many of the inhabitants had been taken and enslaved by the Babylonian empire under King Nebuchadnezzar. And there they remained for around 70 years. During which time the Persian empire conquered the Babylonians.

The Persians had a different way of dealing with conquered nations and King Cyrus of Persia decreed that the Jewish exiles could begin to return to their homeland. They were still under the strong arm of the oppressive Persian empire, however.

In the book of Ezra, we can read of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This second temple was nowhere near as grand as the first temple of Solomon but worship in the temple was really important to both the Jews and to God.

Indeed, God raised up prophets to encourage the people to rebuild and to worship. If you fancy reading about one of these prophets, then why not take a look at the book of Haggai, in the Old Testament – it's a really short book, only 2 chapters long and gives a flavour of how the prophets operated back then.

Andrea reminded us, last week that these events actually happened – they're not just stories and they can be accurately dated. This is history, yes, this is ancient history but verifiable history none the less.

So, it's history and this is also Biblical – we read this in the bible – and as we know, as it says in 2 Timothy 3:16 ... the Bible is God breathed – it is the word of God, which is alive and active, even now.

So, what can this ancient text tell us about the situation we currently find ourselves in? What is God saying to us now through the book of Nehemiah?

So, the temple was rebuilt – but the glory of the Lord never came to that temple – and that's significant.

We read in 1 Kings 8 that when Solomon built the first temple almost 400 years earlier, he dedicated to the Lord, the ark was brought in, and the Glory of the Lord filled the temple...what an amazing event that must have been.

This second temple, well it was open, but it was different – it was not the same. The returnees were having to adjust to a new way of worshipping together.

Churches up and down the land are having to adapt to new ways of worship. But we are made to worship in community. Worship is not supposed to be just Jesus and me – it's about Jesus and 'we'. Worshipping in community. And that's been hard of late and now it's changing again...and still won't be easy...The experience of coming to church when we open next month will be different – it will not be the same.

It's good to meet together but - we need to be sensible, we need to keep safe and so we are, once again, in a different season of worship.

So, the glory of the Lord did not come to the second temple. But the Glory of the Lord was coming, as promised in Haggai, but in a different way. We need to read this book with our Jesus lenses on – you see, the Old testament is always pointing to Jesus....

Haggai was pointing towards a time when, as Jesus said to the Samaritan women, in John 4:23, 'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.' Glimpses of Jesus being promised many years before he came.

But what has this got to do with Nehemiah?

Nehemiah's task was to rebuild the walls....make the city safe, make the city secure and get people working together in this new season, to rebuild the community.

Worship is not just for Sunday's after all.

Let's see how Nehemiah responded to the devastating news about his beloved Jerusalem.

The bad report Nehemiah received could have sent him into a spiral of despair, yes, he was sad – he sat down and wept but then, as we heard last week, he prayed, he confessed and then he prayed again.

Chapter 2 starts 'in the month of Nisan in the 12th year of King Artaxerxes' – this was 4 months after he's had the report from his brother. Nehemiah had been praying for 4 months.... Now that's persistence!

But who was this man, Nehemiah? – he wasn't a priest like Ezra, he was just an ordinary Jew, a layperson. And in exile, as we heard last week, he was the cupbearer to the king. The King had many enemies and Nehemiah had to taste the wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned....Nehemiah was a dispensable nobody.

Have you ever felt like that? Felt like a dispensable nobody?... it's all too easy to be worn down by put downs, to be made to feel like a nobody. I learned a phrase that was new to me at youth camp a couple of weeks ago – you may know it – the phrase was gaslighting – do you know it? Gas lighting – when others wear you down, make you question your own memory, question your perception, or judgement, and make you think wrong things of yourself which can lead to anxiety and depression and low self-esteem. Make you feel like a nobody.

For much of my early church life I felt a bit like a dispensable nobody. 30 years ago, the church was a very different place. I have always been an activist – that’s how God made me, but there were many occasions where I was put down, talked over and made to feel useless. I remember feeling intimidated in meetings and if I had anything to say I could feel my whole insides shaking with fear because the story I had in my head said I wasn’t good enough – I didn’t know my bible very well, I didn’t say very good prayers, and I was waiting for my opinions to be ridiculed, which they sometimes were. It was not a great place to be...And yet.....

To Nebuchadnezzar, Nehemiah was a dispensable nobody. But to God, he was invaluable placed for His purposes. God put Nehemiah in a place where he had ready access to the King.

God has a plan to prosper and not to harm...He always does....

For me, I observed, I learned, I studied, and I prayed and God, well God is always faithful and, he had a plan...I learned to understand my worth in God. And oh what a better place that is.

And he has a plan for each one of us....so if you feel like a dispensable nobody this morning – let me remind you that you are not, and never will be, in God’s eyes...so take heart. Trust his opinion of you and not what you perceive the worlds to be.

So, Nehemiah had received the report about Jerusalem which cut him to the heart. He had a passion for his people and wanted to do something about them..... and so he prayed. For 4 months he prayed.

But he hadn’t just been praying, he’d been planning too.

The month of Nisan was the month for doing favours in the Persian culture of the time, and Nehemiah was ready to ask for a favour.

He had bided his time – not by doing nothing but by praying and planning.

So, when the king asked him ‘why does your face look so sad?’ He was ready with an answer.

Yes, as it says in v 2 ‘he was very much afraid’He could easily have been executed by the king, for just looking sad and we can read in Ezra chapter 4 that the same king had ordered the work to stop on the temple previously. Artaxerxes was no pushover.

But God had put a passion in Nehemiah’s heart, and the humble Nehemiah had taken that back to God, he prayed, he had confessed, and he had planned – so when the opportunity arose, he was ready, and he was bold...

I think we can learn a lot from Nehemiah. He is a great example for us all.

What has God given you a passion for? Is it for the church, is it for the poor, the refugee, our Children? What are you passionate about? What makes you burn with anger? – are you passionate about racial injustice, economic injustice?

Then...take it to the Lord in prayer

Confess your sins. Are you part of the problem or have been ignoring God's call? Confess. Then plan – don't just ignore it and hope someone else does something about it. Plan what you are going to do and plan when you are going to do it. And then Be bold – step out and do something about it...

When the king approached Nehemiah, he was ready with an appropriate answer ... he spoke in terms of his ancestors... *'the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins'*. He'd known how to approach the king – he'd not wasted his time as a cup bearer, he'd listened and learned, he'd done his homework.

And the king answered in v 4, *'what is it you want?'*

And Nehemiah knew exactly what he wanted; he had it all planned. And yet, he still sent an arrow prayer to God. Do you see, verse 4 continues. *'Then I prayed to the God of heaven and answered the king....'* In a way the King would respond favourably to – with a plea about his ancestors.

Even if we know we are doing God's work, keep checking it out- keep God at the heart of all you do. And then....be bold – ask big!

Nehemiah goes on to ask for a letter of protection for safe passage and another letter to get all the materials he needs for the rebuild and amazingly the King agrees... And Nehemiah, without hesitation, thanks God.

When things go well it is all so easy to say – ah well, yes, I planned it all, I thought of every detail – it was because of my skills and effort that this or that happened....

Nehemiah says – it was because the gracious hand of my God was on me the king granted my requests. When something goes well – give God the glory. It's ok to take a well done, we all need encouragement but remember to give God the Glory.

What is your passion?

Pray

Confess

Plan

Be bold

Keep praying

Give God the Glory

This is how we are called to live....

And then, in verse 10 we start to get a feeling that opposition is beginning to bubble up, and we'll hear more about this later in the series. Sanballat and Tobiah were disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the city. They didn't like someone coming to interfere with **their** city... even if the intention was to make things better.

We are opening up our building for worship again and starting to think about how to rebuild, spiritually rebuild in this new season, for the benefit of all. And we know that when anyone wants the wellbeing of the church – the enemy is provoked. So, let's hope there are no Sanballat's or Tobiah's out there....but let's be honest, there will be...

If we're doing God's work – expect opposition.

And so, Nehemiah was canny, he was wise. He waited for a few days and then explored the city at night-time with a few trusted others. He took his own horse – one that he could control and keep quiet.

And then and only then he went and talked to the Jews, priests and nobles and those who would be doing the work.

Having done all the prayerful preparation, he shared his passion, he shared the vision and then gave God the Glory.

And they all replied – Let us start rebuilding. So they began this good work.

Good work. Work agreed by all because the planning had been done carefully and prayerfully

Good work because the vision of restoration was clear and attributed to God

Good work because it was done in agreement with the people.

I give thanks for Andrea's careful and prayerful planning for returning to our church.

Her clear vision of ensuring all who are able can return and those who are unable can still worship from their homes.

Her ability to include people in decision making processes that encourages unity.

In our reading from John, Jesus prays to his Father that we may be one.

As Christians we live in the wonderful time when the glory of the Lord has now come.

The word has become flesh and dwells among us.

Jesus came, he died and rose again in order that he could once again send the Glory of God to fill his temple.

And as it says in 1 Corinthians 6 v 19

'Do you not know that your bodies are temples, temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

We are now the temple

We have the glory of God in us – we have his spirit in us.

And people who are filled with God's glory, filled with his spirit will want to live in unity.

Those who are filled with his spirit are too focused on Jesus living inside them to risk grieving him. People who are filled with God's spirit will yearn for a passion for His will.

Unity is a simple function of our partnership in a mission fuelled by Gods gracious hand upon us.

And so, even though we know the task ahead will not be easy. Some things may not go as smoothly as planned. But we are called to work together and to pray.

We pray for a passion to do God's will

We pray in the Spirit of humility and confession

We pray for wisdom in our planning

We pray for courage to step out of our comfort zones.

We pray for protection against the Sanballat's and Tobiah's out there.

We pray big and bold prayers – for our church, our community and our nation as we stand firm together in rebuilding walls – spiritual walls.

We pray for unity within our fellowship

And we thank God that He can do great things through those who put God first and work for His Glory.

Come let us worship the King together.

Amen.