

Nehemiah Chapter 4: 1-4 & 10-18 John 16:29-33

Let's pray.

It's great to be back in our church building isn't it - our first 10.30 service of morning worship with communion for nearly 6 months. Lots of careful and prayerful planning. People working together to enable the resumption of worship in our building. New sides people and stewards. Bible readers and intercessors in place. We have new people being trained up to operate the enhanced tech desk to enable live-streaming. People stepping forward and asking... how can I help? Thank you and may God bless you.

So, things are going well: Be encouraged

In our Old Testament series in the book of Nehemiah Roy spoke to us about chapter 3 where the Jews had begun re-building the walls of Jerusalem. People working together on the huge task of building, repairing and securing the city; if one group was struggling others would come along side and help. Each learning new skills along the way and everyone was involved. A team working together on a seemingly impossible task that no one, on their own, could have possibly achieved.

Nehemiah had a clear vision of what needed doing, a real passion for his task and had prayerfully and carefully planned.

So, things were going well. They were really encouraged.

And then....when we turn to chapter 4 of Nehemiah we discover that the building project was carried out in the face of ruthless and unrelenting opposition.

It may seem a strange reading to have for our first Sunday back together, but having less than a quarter of the congregation back at any one time cannot be how it's meant to be.

I think God has something to say to us this morning. Yes, things are going well, and we praise God for that, but we must not put our feet up and pat ourselves on the back and say everything is fine – because everything is not fine. It is amazing how this ancient book of Nehemiah speaks into today's situation.

In our readings we return to our two characters, Sanballat and Tobiah. We met them briefly in chapter 2 and here they are again. Two unpleasant characters who are undermining and attempting to tear down the good work that has been started.

So, this morning we're going to see what opposition looked like back in Nehemiah's time, how Nehemiah responded and then consider how opposition appears to us today and how we are called to respond.

The leadership of Nehemiah and the faith of the Jews were tested to the limits. Nehemiah's handling of harassment, and the subsequent temptation to discouragement, is full of

instruction. The way that we deal with frustrations in Christian work and in our personal lives shows what kind of people we are or maybe **whose** people we are.

But why did Sanballat and Tobiah see the rebuilding of Jerusalem as such a threat?

One commentator suggests that a well-fortified city that was strategically placed on trade routes would bring economic prosperity to the Jews and take away trade from the Samaritan, threatening their economic supremacy. So, it was about power and it was also about money...power and money ....as these things often are....But there was also a spiritual side. This was God's chosen people rebuilding God's holy city.

What about us here today?...who are we a threat to? We may not threaten anyone's economic prosperity but let's consider whose kingdom is being threatened when God's people come together for his glory? Yes, when anyone is working for the wellbeing of the church, the enemy is provoked.

So, what did Nehemiah's opposition look like?

We see simmering anger which presented itself in the form of mockery and ridicule:

Sanballat begins with wounding sarcasm: 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall?' (4: 2). Note these remarks were made 'in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria'...These evil men were ratcheting up the threat by inciting others.

Sanballat continues 'Will they offer sacrifices?' ...in other words 'Are these fanatics going to pray the wall up? You're just a bunch of nobodies, not a builder between you. So yeh, offer your sacrifices, get down on your knees. Let's see if your so-called God can help you. Trying to undermine their faith.

Can you imagine this today? When people see that our churches are open again...Can you hear the jibes...What are the churches trying to do? Gathering in such trivial numbers, trying to look like goody-two-shoes by keeping the 2m distances and wearing masks— how pathetic is that!

Do you think some people are thinking that? Have you heard anyone say that? I have. Maybe not in those words and thankfully not someone from this church but someone, said to me only last week – I'm not going back to church yet, what's the point! You can't talk to anyone and well, it's not proper worship is it?

Hopefully you haven't said that, but has that thought popped in your brain at all?

Well, squash it now... this is exactly how the evil one works...Pops sarcastic thoughts into our minds...don't let him have the upper hand –let's not allow those unhelpful thoughts to come out of our mouths.....They undermine our faith and like this wretched virus they are unhealthy and spread really easily.

So it's good to be back together, even if just a few at a time. You see we are made to worship together. Remember Cheryl's illustration of burning coals from last week. If we're not connected into church, our faith can quickly turn cold. And that's just what the enemy wants...

For those who are vulnerable, it is perhaps not safe, just yet, to return to church, but please keep connected and keep supporting Christ's church.

Back to Nehemiah, the sarcasm builds : 'Will they finish in a day?' In other words, the task is too large and will never be completed. The clear impossibility of the job in hand, is pressed home: 'Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?' You see, burnt limestone is very crumbly and actually not great for making walls.

Then Tobiah joins in the fun: 'What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!' (4: 3). Tobiah dismisses the Jews as a bunch of amateur builders whose wall would soon fall down again.

So, sarcasm and jibes that actually have some element of truth about them. They did have an enormous task ahead of them and their materials weren't the best. This kind of sarcasm and half-truths can really start to undermine confidence.

Do you remember the sarcasm of the serpent in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3...when Eve told him that they were not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden or we will die..... the serpent replied 'You will not surely die...'. And of course this was a half truth – they ate of the fruit from the tree and they did not instantly die....but death did enter into them....

As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*

Death entered in. Sarcasm and half-truths are a powerful weapon of the enemy. Watch out for it.

Those who are doing God's work can so easily be discouraged by this.

So many of God's visions are brought down before they even get started by discouraging words and negative rumours. If someone has an idea how to build God's kingdom here in Chatham, let's not be the ones to squash it.

Yes, ideas need testing, they need to be in line with scripture and like Nehemiah they need to be prayerfully and carefully planned. But be bold, share your ideas remembering the words of Saint Teresa of Avila which I paraphrase – if a conversation leaves you hopeful, joyful and calls out the fruit of the spirit, then this is from God. If it leaves you fearful, demeaned or anxious it is not.

Look for those situations that inspire hope and don't get distracted by those that bring us down.

How did Nehemiah counteract this malicious slander and disheartening derision?  
This was a critical moment. The future of the whole building project was in the balance.

So far it had just been talk – slander and ridicule – but actually we remember there was the Samaritan army – Jerusalem was being surrounded on all sides....

And so, how did Nehemiah respond?

He prayed! This ought not to surprise us—he prayed when he received distressing news from his brother about the Jews in Jerusalem (ch. 1), and also when King Artaxerxes demanded to know the reason for his sad face (ch. 2). Prayer was the instinctive reaction of Nehemiah when confronted with a crisis.

Not the last thing he did but the first thing!

Nehemiah poured out his heart to God rather than entering into futile arguments with his opponents.

His prayer, however is an interesting one.

He appeals to the mercy of God and asks for justice Nehemiah prays that his enemies may themselves receive the evil which they wished for the people of God. He asks God to pour out his wrath on Sanballat, Tobiah and his allies.

This is known as an imprecatory prayer.

There are a few of these in the Bible. In psalm 109, David calls on God to punish the wicked.

' Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;  
let an accuser stand at his right hand.  
7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty,  
and may his prayers condemn him.  
8 May his days be few;  
may another take his place of leadership.  
9 May his children be fatherless  
and his wife a widow.  
10 May his children be wandering beggars;  
may they be driven from their ruined homes.

Ouch! That sounds harsh! What happened to love your neighbour?

Maybe it's just an Old Testament thing, asking for the wrath of God to descend on our enemies... but no! The Apostles also called down God's wrath on the wicked – remember the death of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5

These, what we may think of as 'problem prayers' can only be understood when we realize that Nehemiah and David and the Apostles were purely and primarily concerned with the glory of God, rather than their own wellbeing. When Sanballat and Tobiah mocked the Jews, God's chosen people, they were in actual fact scorning God himself. When Ananias and

Sapphira failed to give over all the money they had received for the field they sold – they were lying to God. David, a man after God's heart, doing God's work.

So, these kind of prayers do have their place and are spoken out of a deep desire for God's will to be done.

We learn from Nehemiah's prayer that 'The secret of overcoming opposition lies in our very relationship with the Lord.' Being so close to Him, knowing and obeying His will.

But actually, Nehemiah doesn't waste time on these threats. He gives the battle to the Lord – after all, he's much better at battles than we are.

Don't waste time being diverted from God's work by threats from those trying to discourage you.

Today's busy Christians will not have time to fret about the taunts from others.

The immediate response of Nehemiah to the mockery of Sanballat was to pray. And then he urged the builders to get back to their work. Verse 6 'So we rebuilt the wall'. I love that! Pray and get on with it! He doesn't get distracted by those who are trying to divert his attention from the Lord's work.

There was prayer and perspiration!  
As it says in verse 6, they were called to 'work with all their heart'.

And guess what? The prayer and resumption of building really annoyed Sanballat and Tobiah! Verse 7 says they were 'very angry.' Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod....were all very angry... there was now a coalition of evil and a ramping up of opposition as they plotted together to stir up trouble.

Nehemiah's response..... yep you've got it....he prayed.  
V 8 'We prayed to our God **and** posted a guard'

More prayer and now, along with that, watchfulness.  
That's such a good way of dealing with opposition – know your enemy, be observant of how they are operating.

Jesus advised his disciples when he went off to pray in the garden of Gethsemane – he said to them 'watch and pray'.

Keep an eye out, be alert – see what the opposition are doing, so you can be prepared.

But the relentless intimidation and imminent threat of attack wore the Jews down.

Verse 10 says 'The strength of the labourers is giving out.'

Do you hear the panic in the voices of the Jews....

‘there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall’  
Haven’t you heard what the enemy will do – ‘they are going to kill us and put an end to this work’.

10 times they said ...‘wherever you turn they will attack us’

Do you get the sense of panic?

Like Corporal Jones from Dad’s army running round saying, Don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t panic captain Manwaring.

They were becoming overwhelmed and this is a real danger point.

When we are drained of energy, worn out by the work we can be driven to fear and this is when the enemy can really get the upper hand..

Once again Nehemiah saw what was happening and acted, and no doubt prayed as well. Nehemiah assessed the situation and planned a new strategy. Like Jesus going to a quiet place to pray and work out the will of his Father, Nehemiah –he kept his cool. He spoke words of reassurance to ‘the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people’ (4: 14).

He said: ‘Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome’  
And their strength was renewed, and their enemy withdrew. Let’s not miss this in verse 15 – God **frustrated** the enemies plot. Our God is great and awesome.  
Nehemiah prayed, he reassured, and he gave God the glory.

From that day on, half of the men did the work while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour.

The entire city of Jerusalem was converted into an armed camp.

The despondency of verse 10 was replaced with renewed vigour for their God-given mandate to erect the walls of Jerusalem.

What had brought about this change? It was a fresh realization of the presence of their mighty defender; ‘Our God will fight for us!’ (4: 20). Utter belief that they were doing God’s work and God was on their side.

We too are in a battle, we too need to put on our armour. We too are engaged in a warfare, ‘not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Eph. 6: 12).

And We stand firm – remember Roy’s sermon from 2 weeks ago – and if you haven’t heard it – I would urge you to listen to it – especially the last 5 minutes and his passionate plea for us to put on the armour of God each day.

We are to have our swords ready ....the sword of the spirit – which is the word of God. Get to know your bibles – memorise bible verses –. You see...

Nothing is too hard for our God! (Jer. 32: 17).

If our God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)  
He who is in you, is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4)  
I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13)  
I will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5)  
Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

Our God will fight for us, as we work for Him and fight for Him.

So, here in Nehemiah we are given all the tools we need to do God's work in the face of expected opposition.

Firstly, **Faith** - remember that 'Our God will fight for us'. He cares so much for us he died for us. Be so close to him that you know His will for your life. Remember he's on your side. Have faith.

Secondly **Prayer** – Pray for clarity of what God's will is for you and for his church, knowing that God will thwart the enemy in response to our prayers. Don't give up praying. Pray always.

Thirdly, **Watchfulness** – keep your eyes peeled – be alert to the enemies' tactics. Remember St Theresa's words...if a conversation leaves you fearful, demeaned or anxious, it's not from God. And work out a plan to deal with them.

Finally – **Action** – when the tendency is to give up, pray and get on with it!

As it says in James 2:17 Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But the combination of faith, prayer, watchfulness and God inspired action can accomplish great things, despite opposition.

Hear the words of Jesus in our reading from John's Gospel, 'I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'

Let's build our church here in Chatham....Let's spread the good news of Jesus to others. Let's work together with all our heart, knowing our God is with us, always.

Amen