

Nehemiah 8:1-12 / John 4:19-26 “Worship & Discipleship”

Today is the penultimate in our series looking at the book of Nehemiah. And what wisdom this book, and the example of Nehemiah, has for us today and in the current situation we're living in.

We've thought about Nehemiah's example as a person of prayer and action, the two always going together. We've looked at the importance of planning, team work and unity in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, of how to respond to opposition.

Now we reach the point in the account (Chapter 7) when everything was in place:

“And now the wall had been rebuilt, the gates had all been put in place, and the Temple guards, the members of the sacred choir, and the other Levites had been assigned their work.”

But the city was still sparsely populated and so Nehemiah had sent out word to those still living in exile to return, to come back to Jerusalem. About 16,000 people from the different clans of Israel returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns.

The walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt, the work completed and the people have re-settled. Job done! Not quite! Because Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem had never been simply about the state of the physical walls of Jerusalem but about the spiritual walls of God's community too, and God's glory.

And so, now, with the physical safety and needs of the people looked after, it is to their spiritual state that his account now turns. And what follows is the spiritual renewal of a whole community - people being profoundly touched by the Spirit of God, leading to worship, praise and discipleship.

And the first thing to note is that at the heart of the community's renewal is the reading of God's Word. Nehemiah had clearly prepared to gather all the people together to hear the book of the Law, constructing a wooden platform high above the people. But notice that our reading says,

“All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. *They* told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.”

Nehemiah had prepared the people for this occasion but it was the *people* who asked for the Holy Book to be brought out. There was a desire, a yearning to hear God's word and we learn that they (men, women and all who were able to understand) gathered together in the city centre to listen.

But it wasn't Nehemiah that read the Word of God to the people but a man called Ezra.

“So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly. Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion.... He read it aloud from daybreak till noon..... And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

As Ezra reads to the people, they hang on every word he speaks, listening attentively from daybreak to noon, their eyes fixed on him. Hear how hungry they are! We learn in the book of Ezra, that he “was a teacher well-versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel had given. He had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel”.

God had given Ezra the gift of teaching His word; he clearly had a love and deep knowledge of God’s word, and the people soaked the word up. But Ezra also had a team of people, the Levites, to help explain and instruct the people in the meaning of the word so they could understand it and what it meant for them in their day. I almost imagine the people being split into small groups (standing not sitting!) led by the Levite priests a bit like home groups today!

This is a beautiful example of God giving gifts to the fellowship, just as he does today. So, yes, we have people who are trained to preach and open up God’s word, but in our fellowship, but God doesn’t want it to be confined to those people; there are others among us who love to study God’s word and who God may be calling to share in the work of opening up his Word - wither through preaching, or leading Home groups, coming alongside others in an informal way and sharing God’s word to help build His people up! We need the gifts of those who are able to help us interpret and understand what God’s word meant and means for us today. May be that’s something you may feel God is calling you to?

Attentive listening, reading, grappling with God’s word to understand how what was written thousands of years ago means for us today.

And as the people hear God’s word, they are drawn, also to worship God. We learn that in verses 5-6, “As soon as he opened the book, they all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praise the Lord, the great God, and all the people raised their arms in the air and answered, “Amen! Amen!” They knelt in worship, with their faces to the ground.

There’s a wonderful sense of spontaneity in their response - praise and worship. A deep reverence as the Book is brought out - not worship of the Book, but I believe reverence for God. They stand and praise God, they kneel in worship, they bow low with their faces to the ground. This is whole body worship!

Some of us are busy recording action songs for the next Family Praise Party at the moment. It’s great fun, and most children love using their whole body to worship God. We adults? Not so much....., or at least not unless we’re joining in with children’s action songs! Many of us can feel a bit embarrassed. Perhaps we feel more free in the privacy of our own homes, when there’s no one else around.

Story - St Cuthberts Retreat House; woman prostrate under the Lord’s Table - she was meeting with God and she was worshipping in spirit and in truth!

Perhaps in this strange time when (at least for those of us meeting in the building) we can’t express our worship through singing the words or shouting out loud, we might find ways of expressing our worship with our bodies instead? Raising our arms to praise God, getting off our chair and kneeling, bowing down in reverence. But whether we express our love for God outwardly or inwardly, the only important thing is that we’re worshipping in spirit and truth, just as Jesus foresaw when speaking to the woman at the well.

Hearing and understanding God’s word, worshipping Him from the depths of their being, also led the people to a profound response. They were so deeply affected by hearing God’s word, that they wept, mourned even.

I particularly like the way the Good News Bible translates verse 9: “When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry.”

They're weeping because their hearts have been moved and touched by God's word, and they realise that God requires something from them; something concrete that they need to do in response. And such is their grief that Nehemiah and Ezra, together with the Levites have to calm them down - and you get the feeling that they had quite a job on their hands!

Interesting - here we have the people clearly experiencing godly sorrow. You'd think Nehemiah would catch the moment presented to him by calling them to repentance. It would seem the most logical thing to do. But in fact, Nehemiah does the complete opposite. He tells them instead to 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' He calls them to celebrate and rejoice with feasting and sharing with others:

Meeting with the Lord God afresh may well lead us to weep and ultimately to repent, but when we meet with the one who loves us and when He speaks to us through his word, it is JOY that should be the overwhelming characteristic or mark, because we're meeting One who loves us and has told us that He will be like a spring of water welling up within us. When people, like the woman at the well, met with Jesus, even when they came before him in their sinfulness, their encounters were overwhelmingly marked by joy and praise.

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

A time of repentance would follow, but not until they'd had time to reflect. If we were to go on and read the next chapter, we'd learn that they went away and after a period of 23 days, they re-assembled, confessed their sins and committed themselves to living in obedience to God's Law, including some very specific changes in their behaviour and actions. This is discipleship - when worship and hearing God's word also leads to renewal in how we live our lives.

We need to understand God's word with our minds; we need to respond in our hearts, and then we need to respond in our actions and the way we live, applying what God is saying to how we live. That's discipleship. What might God be saying to us, today I wonder? What is he requiring of his people (corporately) and what is he requiring of you and me personally? What are the changes that he is calling us to make in our daily living, and possibly our life together as God's people?

CONCLUSION

The physical walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, and now the community's spiritual walls were also being restored and rebuilt, as God's people discovered His word. Hearing and understanding His word, re-discovering their great God, they were drawn into worship and praise of Him, but also stirred and moved by His Spirit to apply his word to their life as a community of faith. May we, like them, listen to and immerse ourselves in God's word, allowing Him to bring fresh understanding of his word, drawing us into deeper worship of Him, and leading us to live his ways in our daily life together.

