

A sermon given on Sunday 25th October 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst
(fifth in a series of five sermons on Nehemiah)

Readings: Nehemiah 8, Psalm 1, Matthew 7:21-29

Words of hope

Could you do with a little inspiration and hope? As we continue to face uncertainty, with no guarantee of when life will return to “normal”, or even what “normal” will mean in the future, here are a few quotes I’ve gathered that may lift your sights above the doom and gloom, and maybe your spirits as well.

Let’s start with someone I’d never heard of, an 19th Century German physicist called Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, who wrote

I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is they must change if they are to get better.

Someone not known as a philosopher, said this:

Sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together.

That was Marilyn Monroe.

Pablo Neruda, the 20th century poet from Chile, wrote

You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot keep Spring from coming.

And lastly, the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote these words of encouragement:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Nehemiah’s story

Today we come to the last in our series of 5 sermons on the Book of Nehemiah. I wonder what has stuck in your memory from this brief visit to Jerusalem in the 5th Century BC?

In chapter 1 Nehemiah, an official in the Persian court, hears from his brother of the plight of the inhabitants of Judah, and after praying earnestly makes a plan to rebuild the broken-down walls of Jerusalem.

In chapter 2, his prayers are answered when King Artaxerxes sends him to Jerusalem with authority and resources to bring his vision to fulfilment, and he inspires the people to tackle the work. Chapter 3, which we didn’t study together, describes how each family or group of people took on a section of wall to rebuild, making the whole project a community effort.

In chapter 4 we saw how Nehemiah faced opposition and discouragement with faith and determination.

Chapter 5 describes how Nehemiah responded to complaints of exploitation and injustice by challenging the rich and powerful, resulting in the cancellation of debts and the return of assets to the poor.

Nehemiah was called by God to lead his people in a period of restoration and renewal of their national life. It began with *physical restoration*, as everyone took a share in rebuilding the walls. It continued with *social restoration*, as injustice and inequality in society was addressed, based on the values of God's law.

But there was one important aspect still to be tackled – the *spiritual and religious restoration and renewal* of the nation. And that is our theme for today.

Our story

I hope you have noticed along the way that the story of Nehemiah, like most of the Bible, has resonances with the situations we face today, and can give us inspiration and hope. When we finally get through the Coronavirus crisis we will need to rebuild our economy, our businesses and our arts sector. But we will also need to address the social consequences of the current crisis, a legacy of poverty, of increased domestic abuse and of interrupted healthcare. Indeed, these are matters that need addressing now.

But what about the spiritual life of our nation? Many people have depended for their security on financial wellbeing and jobs, and have sought to satisfy their need for spiritual meaning with the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. As these have failed, we in the Church have an opportunity to offer something far more substantial – faith in the God who made us, who cares for us and who holds the future in his hands. This Christmas will be a particularly important time to reach out to our community with the good news of God's love in Christ. Please pray for all of us who are leading or preaching at services over the festive season, so that we can connect with people where they are at. Please pray also that the Holy Spirit will touch those who are open to God and draw them to Christ.

Attending to God's Word

Nehemiah's success in inspiring his people to work together to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem led to a renewal of their sense of identity as a people. Threats from outsiders drew them closer together to unite against a common enemy.

But for a nation to be united needs more than a common project or a common enemy. It needs a common set of values and beliefs. Our nation had for centuries a common identity as a Christian nation, even though it took centuries for those in power to accept that allowing different forms of Christianity to live side by side did not pose a threat. In the past 2 centuries that sense of a common Christian heritage has been gradually eroded, to be replaced with a secular, post-Enlightenment philosophy that, for all its pretensions of freedom of belief and expression, is now in danger of becoming the new "religion" to which everyone is expected to conform, with those whose traditional beliefs are at odds with the new precepts being treated as heretics, or, to use the modern equivalent, "bigots".

Nehemiah as the governor had an ally in the priest Ezra, who in a similar way to Nehemiah had gained the king's permission to go back to Judah and re-establish proper worship in the Temple and the keeping of the Law of Moses.¹

The Jews' identity was not just as an ethnic group, but as a people whose life was organised around the keeping of the law that God had given to Moses centuries earlier. The reason that their God had allowed them to be taken into exile by first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians was that they had failed to be faithful to this law and to their identity as a people uniquely chosen by God, who were to bear witness to the nations by embodying the principles of his Kingdom in their society. Disobedience to the Law had been seen in day-to-day life, with corruption and failure to care for the vulnerable in society becoming endemic. But, equally importantly, the nation had disobeyed God by worshipping foreign gods instead of maintaining exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, their Creator and Redeemer.

What could be more important for this season of restoration and renewal than a return to the study of God's law? And so we see in chapter 8 the people gathered together in a large square to hear Ezra read from the Book of the Law of Moses, standing on a specially-constructed platform and flanked by leading priests and Levites, whose job it was to interpret the Law so that everyone could understand.

Note the enormous respect with which the reading from God's law was greeted. When Ezra opened the scroll, all the people stood up². Before reading, he uttered a prayer of praise to "the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands".³ We follow this pattern in our Eucharist services by standing when the Gospel is read.

Grief and joy

When you hear the Bible read in church, how do you react? Do you feel inspired, encouraged, or maybe challenged? Perhaps, to be honest, sometimes it just goes over your head, or in one ear and out the other. Were you surprised to hear that the Jews listening to Ezra reading the Law responded with weeping? I can only assume that the reading of the Law made them realise how unfamiliar they were with it, and how little they were keeping it. The sudden realisation of how far we fall short of obeying God's laws can be, and should be, a cause for sorrow.

But as we are touched by God's word, something beautiful and holy is happening. Do you know the experience of feeling God touch you very deeply as you listen to his word being read, or explained to you? Have you ever listened to a sermon and felt that God was speaking directly to you? As God lays bare an area of sin or of hurt in your life, it can be a painful experience. But it is also healing. God only ever chastises us for our good. As the psalmist wrote "weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning"⁴.

¹ See Ezra chapter 7.

² Nehemiah 8:5

³ Verse 6

⁴ Psalm 30:5 NRSV

In response to the people weeping, the Levites pass on a message from Nehemiah:

‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’⁵

Indeed, the day turns into a party, as people celebrate with feasting,

and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

This last comment is important: in verses 7 and 8 we read that the Levites helped the people to understand the Law. One explanation of this is that the language that most people spoke at that time was Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew, whereas the Law was written in Hebrew. So a translation was required.

But whatever the practical circumstances, there is a clear principle here which is very relevant to us. We need help to understand God’s word. The Bible can seem at first to be a very daunting book – a big volume, written in ancient times and in a culture very different to our own. Lack of familiarity can be off-putting. Even those who were brought up with the Bible and know certain stories and sayings often have no idea where to find them. But help is at hand! There are plenty of books and online resources for our personal use, and in addition the Bible is preached and applied each week here in Church, and we run house groups and courses to help us all understand not only what it is saying, but how it applies to our lives.

As a result of this reading of the Law by Ezra, there are further developments which we don’t have time to comment on now in detail. In the second half of chapter 8, the people renew the annual celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, with great rejoicing. It reminds me in a small way of when we restarted services here in church. Christianity isn’t about rituals, but rituals do help us remember who we are, and shared rituals, such as Sunday worship, remind us that we belong together.

The reading of the Law also leads to a national act of repentance and re-commitment to follow God’s laws, which you can read about in chapters 9 and 10. All the religious and secular leaders sign a written agreement, binding themselves to keep their side of the covenant between God and his people, and in particular commit themselves not to intermarry with other peoples, not to trade on the Sabbath, to cancel all debts every seven years, and to make regular payments of money and the firstfruits and tithes of their agricultural produce and livestock, because so that the worship in the Temple can be maintained, or as it is phrased in the closing words of the document, “We will not neglect the house of our God”⁶.

Our circumstances today are different from those of the Jews in Nehemiah’s day. But the principles that underlay the reforms that he oversaw are just as valid for Christians today. We face an uncertain future. Now, more than ever, is the time for us to remind ourselves who we are as the people of God. Like the Jews, we have a story to tell of God’s salvation and of his calling. *Their* story involved the calling of their ancestor Abraham, their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the giving of the

⁵ Nehemiah 8:9-11

⁶ Nehemiah 10:39

Law through Moses as the guide for their national life. Our story involves our calling to be disciples of Jesus Christ, our deliverance from sin and death through the death and resurrection of Christ, and the teachings of the Bible and especially of Jesus, together with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to be our guide through life.

Like the ancient people of Israel, we can go astray, following the devices and desires of our own hearts, or unthinkingly absorbing values and beliefs from the secular society around us without referring to God's Word. But the Bible shows us what God is like and what he wants from us, as well as his grace and mercy when we go wrong.

Psalm 1 speaks of the blessings of those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
² but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Similarly, Jesus warns in the Sermon on the Mount that if we build our lives on shifting sands, disaster awaits us. But

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.⁷

The consistent message of the Bible is that God blesses those who obey him by leading their lives according to his word. Jesus does not promise his disciples an easy life, but he does give us his Spirit, and reminds us that he is with us always⁸. And what can compare with the knowledge that our lives are in harmony with our Creator and that we are his agents for bringing about his good purposes for the world?

Under Nehemiah's leadership, the Jews regained their sense of identity, pulled together for a common task, became united in the face of adversity, addressed issues of injustice in their society and re-committed themselves to following God's law. In our day, I believe it is time for us Christians to remember who we are and what God has done for us, and to re-commit ourselves to living out the values of his Kingdom, showing respect for his written word in the Bible, and leading our lives according to its teaching. If we do, God's blessing will fall not only on us, and on our church life, but on all we have dealings with, and in some significant way, on the world.

⁷ Matthew 7:24-25 NRSV

⁸ Matthew 28:20

We do not need to wait until the Coronavirus crisis is over before we re-commit ourselves to the service of God and our neighbour. As we come to the altar today, let us remind ourselves of what God has done for us in Jesus, and re-commit ourselves to living according to the values of his Kingdom. As we plan what food we will eat and as we buy products in the shops or online, let us be aware of the issues of sustainability, fair trade and the avoidance of exploitation that flow from our lifestyle choices. As we spend money on ourselves, let us also give generously to the needy and also “not neglect the house of our God.”

As Christians we all have a part to play in God’s purposes of restoration and renewal. This quote from Barack Obama is relevant here:

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.

God used Nehemiah to bring change because he was a man of prayer, who directed his life according to God’s word. May we, together, follow his example.