

Nehemiah: Taking Action

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 27th September 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Nehemiah 2:1-18, Matthew 8:5-13
(2nd in series on Nehemiah)

Introduction

We've all heard the phrase "Every great journey starts with one small step". I wonder what small steps you have made during your life that ended up leading to greater things? Sometimes the first step is the hardest one to make. When you were learning to swim, perhaps the hardest part was to take both feet off the floor of the pool. Maybe you can remember plucking up the courage as a teenager or young adult to tell someone that you really liked them and wanted to go out with them.

Perhaps it was picking up the phone to enquire about a job, or getting yourself along to your first meeting of the slimming club. For some, setting foot inside the door of an unfamiliar church for your first service there took an enormous amount of courage. I know that for many people in the past few months, stepping outside the door of their home, or making a trip to the shops has required determination and courage.

A hunger for change

Last week we began our 5-part sermon series on the story of Nehemiah, and we read how this ex-pat Jew living in the Persian Empire heard from his brother and others about the plight of their fellow-Jews living in Judah, and about the ruined state of the city of Jerusalem and the disgrace and low morale which was there. We thought about challenges, and how the motivation to address them can start with *lament* – an emotional connection with the situation that needs to be changed or the people who are suffering.

Next, we saw how Nehemiah *repented* of the sins of his people which had led to their city being destroyed in the first place. By associating himself with the story of his people and owning the problem, Nehemiah made both the problem and its solution his business.

Finally, Nehemiah was willing to *re-invent* himself – to make a career change from being butler to the king to becoming a builder of city walls. We thought about how, if we want a situation to change, *we* have to be willing to change too.

Nehemiah's first step

We left Nehemiah at the end of chapter 1 praying that God would open the heart of the king to help him achieve his ambition of going to Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls. This was no small request. In fact, I imagine that any of Nehemiah's close family or friends whom he told about this must have thought he was crazy. Why

would the king of the mighty Persian empire want to give permission and even material assistance to someone from one of his subject peoples to rebuild their city? And, in fact, if we read in the book of Ezra we will see that an earlier attempt by the Jews to rebuild the walls just a short time before this had been stopped on the king's command following a complaint by neighbouring hostile peoples¹. This whole project seemed doomed never to get off the starting blocks!

In addition, kings in the ancient world were autocratic and could be unpredictable. How was Nehemiah the cupbearer going to open up a conversation with King Artaxerxes? Bringing up a controversial topic and making a request that contravened previous royal policy was a highly risky venture!

But Nehemiah had prayed, and when the moment came, he knew that this was the opening God was giving him. The king noticed that Nehemiah was looking sad, and asked him why. With his heart in his mouth, came out with it:

³ I said to the king, 'May the king live for ever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' ⁴ Then the king said to me, 'What do you request?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵ Then I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it.'²

What happened next was a miraculous answer to prayer. Not only did the king grant this request, but when Nehemiah followed it up with further requests for letters of authority and timber from the king's forests, these were granted too! "Nothing ventured, nothing gained"!

Stepping out in faith

The vision of the Diocese of Oxford is for the church to be more "Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous", so that we can be "a more Christlike Church for the sake of God's world". Nehemiah was certainly all three. His heart was moved at the plight of his people, he spent weeks mourning, praying and reflecting, and in today's verses we see his courage as he steps out in faith to make his request of the king.

We are all aware of the many challenges in our world – Covid, refugees, slavery, climate change and biodiversity loss – and in the church, in particular, a decline in attendance and an aging membership. There's plenty to lament about, plenty to repent of. But are we willing to pray and to take action to face these challenges? If every great journey begins with a small step, then we need to discern what that small step is and take it.

What would that mean for you?

- to pick up the phone to someone you don't know well who might be lonely?

¹ Ezra 4:7-23 (NB Ezra 4:24 has been dislocated from another part of the story)

² Nehemiah 2:3-5 NRSV

- to set up a direct debit to the church, or to a charity which tackles slavery or poverty?
- to commit to eating less meat, driving less or shopping more ethically?
- to overcome your fears and join a house group or take part in a course to help you become a better disciple?

The first step may seem scary or costly, but the results can exceed our wildest expectations. And we need to remember that after the first step there's a second, and then a third. Conrad Hilton, the founder of the hotel chain, said this:

"Achievement seems to be connected with action. Successful men and women keep moving. They make mistakes, but they don't quit."³

Looking back, reaching forward

This year we are celebrating 800 years of Christian worship on this site. Our flower festival reminds us of the many areas of Christian service within this church, and of the community around us. We should be grateful to the thousands of men and women who have served in different ways over the centuries to enable this church to be a centre of worship and witness in our community. I'm particularly mindful of Rev Henry Parsons, who had the vision to rebuild this church and took action to make it happen. And of his daughter Jane, who used her skills to build the font and the pulpit. In more recent years a vision to serve the community and to reach out has resulted in the founding of the Community Care transport scheme, a counselling service and projects to employ a youth worker and a family worker.

We continue to face the challenges of limited finances, an ageing building and an ageing congregation. None of us can do much about getting older, but we can support measures to make our church more user-friendly for younger people and families; we can actively welcome newcomers, and we can pray and give so that the mission of our church can go forward. And if we're to help others to discover the blessings of the Christian faith, then we also need to take responsibility for our own growth in faith. Being a disciple is about being committed to life-long learning. It's never too late to be *knowing God for ourselves* more deeply, to be *growing as individuals and as a church*, and to be *showing God's love in the world*.

Next steps

For Nehemiah, the next steps after speaking to the king were to travel to Jerusalem, to survey the work that needed to be done, and then to share his vision for rebuilding with the leaders and people of Judah. And as Nehemiah told his story of how God had answered his prayers, the hearts of his hearers were inspired and they committed themselves to the work.

³ Quoted at <https://www.lifecoach-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/every-great-journey-starts-with-one-small-step-but-persistence-gets-you-there>

And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.⁴

As we face the future, as individuals and as a church, may we be inspired by the testimony of those who have gone before us, and by the recognition of God’s hand at work in our own lives, so that we will take up the challenges that God places before us, and rise up and build his kingdom in our lives, in our church and in our world. Amen!

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Ne 2:18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. (This is a more literal translation than NRSV)