

## **Putting our house in order**                      **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Nehemiah 5:1-13**; Matthew 23:1-13

### **Introduction**

Think back to a time before Covid, when you could visit someone in their home, or invite people into your house. In normal times I visit every family who ask us to baptise their children in their homes, and begin to get to know them on their own territory. Sometimes I'm impressed with how tidy their living room is, considering they have small children – but I know that in many cases they've got the children into bed first and done a big tidy-up before I come! It's perfectly natural, of course – we all make an effort to look presentable when we have visitors.

But what is much more important than the tidiness of our house is how the people who live there treat each other. It's no use having a tidy house if those who live in it are unhappy and can't get on.

### **Nehemiah's challenge**

And so we turn to the story of Nehemiah, part 4 of 5. Nehemiah has galvanised the people of Judah to work together to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. They face opposition and threats from the officials of neighbouring peoples, as we heard last week – Tobiah the Ammonite, Sanballat the Horonite and Geshem the Arab – and have to divide their time and manpower between building the wall and standing guard with their weapons.

But today in chapter 5 Nehemiah faces a new challenge – as well as the threat from outside, there is a threat from within. There has been a poor harvest and many of the people are destitute. But they still have to pay taxes to the Persian king. And the poor, seeking to pay their taxes and feed their families, have been exploited by the rich from their own community. It's all very well building a wall to shut out the threats from outside, but even more important is the need for social justice within the community. It's time to put their house in order.

### **Slavery and debt**

As we all know, there was no social security in the ancient world. If you fell on hard times you had to borrow money, and use your property – house, fields, even your clothes – as a pledge, or collateral to guarantee the loan. Slavery was an integral part of the social order in all societies, and if the worst came to the worst, you could always sell yourself or your family into slavery. There were laws to govern how this worked, both in Israel and in neighbouring countries. In the books of the Jewish law it was prescribed that all Hebrew slaves had to be released, without payment, in the seventh year. There were also laws to protect slaves from mistreatment.

Lending money was also governed by laws to ensure that the borrower was treated with respect and kindness. In Exodus 22 we read

<sup>25</sup> “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. <sup>26</sup> If ever you take your neighbour’s cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, <sup>27</sup> for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. <sup>1</sup>

### **The complaint of the poor**

Nehemiah faces a barrage of complaints from the population. Contrary to the law, some of the rich people and those with well-paid government jobs are lending money to the poor and charging interest. Things have got so bad for many that they are making arrangements for their sons and daughters to become slaves to settle debts, and some of their daughters have already become slaves<sup>2</sup>. They cry out against inequality, saying “our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The bigger picture**

Nehemiah is angry, and acts immediately. He speaks to individual nobles and officials, and then holds a big meeting where he tears them off a strip, and confronts them with the injustice of what they are doing. It is worth noting how he phrases his complaint:

“The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?”<sup>4</sup>

There’s a bigger principle at stake: God’s people should be conducting themselves in a way that shows respect for God and his values of kindness and mercy, and should be setting an example to other nations, not being hypocritical and open to accusation.

I’m reminded of the prophetic words of Micah, given centuries earlier:

He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?<sup>5</sup>

Those two words *justice* and *kindness*<sup>6</sup> are key to the ethics of the Old Testament. The word translated *kindness* here is the Hebrew *hesed*, which appears elsewhere in

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ex 22:25–27). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>2</sup> The NRSV translates “have been ravished”, but this is not supported by other translations. The word *can* be translated in this way, but it has just been used to mean being enslaved, and this is the meaning here.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ne 5:5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ne 5:9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Mic 6:8). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrew *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) and *hesed* (חֶסֶד)

the NRSV as *steadfast love* and in other translations as *loving kindness* or *mercy* (as NIV). Micah's words have a very similar meaning to those of Jesus when he says that the greatest two commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour. Loving God includes giving him respect and living according to his commandments; and loving our neighbour includes showing them kindness and doing our best to ensure they are treated fairly and with justice.

In Matthew 23, Jesus criticises the Pharisees and scribes for paying attention to minor regulations, such as tithing mint and cumin, but neglecting to kindness and justice<sup>7</sup>. Elsewhere he reminds them of the prophecy of Hosea "I desire mercy, not sacrifice"<sup>8</sup>.

It's no good us coming to church and praying if we're not prepared to live out God's commandments in our day-to-day lives. Christians above all should be those whose lifestyles reflect justice and kindness, otherwise we stand condemned of hypocrisy.

Nehemiah could not be accused of hypocrisy. In his speech to the meeting he had called, he described how he and his associates had spent money buying back Jews who'd become enslaved, and had lent money to those in need to help them through the crisis. He had put his money where his mouth was, setting an example for others to follow. His hearers were ashamed and had no response, except to agree not only to stop charging interest, but to restore fields and vineyards they had taken in pledge, enabling their owners to regain their livelihood. Nehemiah brings the priests in to make the people swear to do what they'd committed themselves to, and the meeting ends with the people saying "Amen" and praising the Lord. What a nice way to end a sermon!

### **What about us?**

I'm sure you've noticed parallels to our current situation. The Jews under Nehemiah needed to stand together and support one another in the face of their crisis, instead of looking to their own interests. As we face the challenges of Covid and the current economic crisis, we also need to do this. And Covid is nowhere near as big a crisis as the environmental crisis, whose repercussions will last not only decades but centuries.

In our own community there are people struggling financially, such as those who are unable to pay mortgages because they've lost their jobs. Angela our Family Worker, is supporting some of them with the help of the Co-op, who have a system for distributing unsold food. The Crowthorne Foodbank is an essential resource in our community. Further afield in our country and beyond so many suffer through poverty, human trafficking, war and climate change. We should remember that we are all part of the human family. As the people said in our passage, our flesh is as their flesh, our children are as their children. We have a responsibility to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God" as we shop ethically, reduce our

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<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 23:23

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 9:13, 12:7, quoting Hosea 6:6

carbon footprint and our meat consumption, and give generously to those in need. This may mean starting, or increasing, regular giving to charities who work to relieve suffering. Another implication for those of us who can afford it may soon be to pay higher taxes to support the economy and those who are in difficulties. It's all too easy to retreat into our comfortable, protected bubbles and do the minimum. God calls us to up our game.

So how will we respond to these challenges? Will we copy the words of the Jews to Nehemiah and answer "We will do as you say"<sup>9</sup>? Will we say "Amen" and praise the Lord? Will we, like them, do what we have promised?

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<sup>9</sup> Nehemiah 5:12