

## NEHEMIAH

By the time we reach that chapter read today as one of our lessons, the walls had been completed. Despite the opposition, the undermining, the nastiness and discouragements, the walls had been finished. But Nehemiah knew that this was just the beginning. Now the people themselves needed building back up into the people God wanted them to be.

With this in mind, at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the year (which for the Jews was the most sacred month of the year) the people met together at the Water Gate. The reading says that everyone who could understand was there- men, women and children. Then Ezra the priest began to read the Law-their bible-probably the first 5 books of our bible.

It's worth noting the attitude of the people as the Law was read:

- All the people stood up. Usually they sat to hear. They stood up- much as we do when the Gospel is read in our service. Why do we do that? Surely it's out of respect and we know that what's being read is something very important. It's not just the Word of God but it's also about the Son of God.
- The people were attentive. They listened carefully. It says the other priests together with Ezra made the meaning clear. They explained what they were reading.
- These people were committed. It says in verse 3 that Ezra read aloud from daybreak til noon- about 6 hours. That was some session. So think yourselves lucky!

And as the people listened to the reading of the Law, they responded.

- First they worshipped God. Verse 6 says 'Ezra opened the book. He praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded. 'Amen. Amen' then they bowed down and worshipped the

Lord with their faces to the ground. ' Somehow these people recognized that God was there- with them.

- The people began to weep. Verse 9 says ' for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law'. Why was this? I think it was probably because they realised how far they had drifted from what God had originally wanted them to be and that had led to their exile. And sometimes hasn't that happened to us or to others who have come into this church? Sometimes in this place, where God has been worshipped for hundreds of years, we feel our deepest emotions come to the surface.
- But after the weeping came the joy. Verse 12 says 'Then all the people went away to eat and drink.... To celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them'. They could leave behind all that had made them weep and know that God was with them and cared for them. It was a new beginning for them.
- And then finally they were moved to share what they had with others who didn't have. There was a practical result to their hearing this Word. Yes, they wept as they were moved by what was read, then they experienced the joy of sorting things out with God and then this led to action, to doing something.

So what does this mean for us today?

The Bible itself says, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man or woman of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'

The Word of God is living and powerful and it can and does change people's lives. It has changed my life. It was as a result of someone preaching God's Word that I went overseas as a missionary in 1980 and many times since then God has used the Bible to speak to me, to comfort me and yes, also to challenge me and to show me things I need to change in my behaviour. And

I'm sure many of you here could cite occasions when God has spoken to you through a verse or part of the Bible.

Do we expect to hear God speak to us, to you and to me?

I came across this amazing quote from Mahatma Ghandi:

'You Christians look after a document(the Bible) containing enough dynamite to blow all civilization to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle- torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.' For many people today the Bible is just that- literature - a book on a shelf albeit a nice looking book with a smart cover and lots of dust but for us Christians it is the Word of God himself.

These people in the passage for today, really listened to what was read and because of that they heard God speak to them.

May God Himself speak to us today.