

## Nehemiah – Be Practical and Consistent

23<sup>rd</sup> February 2014.

It is always risky to come in the middle of a series of sermons, not knowing how previous preachers have tackled the subject and how those who follow will take the subject. Still, I suppose, if I get it wrong you won't have to hear me again!

I'm grateful to Chris for entrusting me with this. He and I served together in Gillingham deanery before his move here and I was his Rural Dean.

So we turn to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is described as one of the more attractive characters in the OT. It is thought that the Chronicler, responsible for this used personal memoirs written by Nehemiah himself – and that a good part of it has been put in without alteration. So we are getting the words of the prophet himself.

Nehemiah's journey started when he heard news from Judah of the fate of Jerusalem and of his tearful reaction as God burdened him with the fact that something needed to be done. He wept before God for the city. What do we see when we look around our society? It's depressing. Just look at the news and its doom and gloom. Then look at the people of God: a small shrinking minority. What are we going to do about it? Does the low state of our land in relation to God make us weep, or are we not bothered.

Here then Nehemiah, the king's cup-bearer – a high up and responsible office in the Persian Empire – upset at what he has heard. He wants to do something but what can he do. He knows God wants him to do something but that something could get him into trouble, particularly as it involved a nation that was not allowed to have nationhood. He could lose his job and his life for suggesting that Jerusalem is restored. However the king notices that he is sad. Ouch – here comes trouble! What does Nehemiah do – send up an arrow prayer to God. Only God could save him – and he did. The king not only agreed to the restoration of Jerusalem but gave Nehemiah a well-funded expedition. One of the things I have found emphasised to us in these first few weeks of 2014 are our weaknesses as a church. There is so much to do, but we here are the resources, particularly people? How do we start seeing change in our community and nation? By accepting our weakness, but also the surpassing power of God to change all of that! Nehemiah did and he got his expedition. When we accept our weakness, we discover God's strength.

So what did Nehemiah do? It's what he didn't do is what's interesting. Here's a man who comes from Persia as a senior government person and rather than laying down the law, he takes his time to go out and survey the territory. He gets to understand the size of the task in hand. He realises that it is a big one. But here is a man who understands God's power to do something unlikely, impossible. But as he rode, he saw the possibilities – what was needed to present to the leaders; to envision them.

There is always the temptation to go in with both feet when we think that God wants us to do something. We let our experience drive us

rather than seeing what's needed. Nehemiah was a man of prayer and a man who examined the boundaries and saw what was needed. If we want to see our own community restored we need to know our community. That doesn't just mean doing a survey, but being prepared to walk the streets, understanding the people, take a look at the issues and we can't do that sitting inside a church building.

One of my former curates, now an Incumbent, often tells me that prayer walking is a great encouragement and is proving popular in churches of different traditions. She said to me just the other day that it's interesting that the view of the local community changes when prayer takes place outside our church walls. We must, she said, 'recognise that we are in it and can see what is going on around us'. It gives us a fresh perspective on what local needs are and what we might need to do to reach out to these people who live here. If you are part of a small group, why not start walking and praying in your neighbourhood? It's surprising how God can change our perspective. Indeed in Bev's present parish it led to local officials, business and retail workers coming together in the parish church for a service of prayer and vision for what is a depressed town just on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales.

The bottom line for Nehemiah was that he was actually called to rebuild the walls. It started with a discussion with the leaders, and then it was all organisation. Remarkably, the walls were rebuilt in an astonishing 52 days – a remarkable feat. For the people were stirred by Nehemiah's appeal – who rallied to the task and the work was done, despite threats of interference from various hostile elements around, led by Sanballat, governor of Samaria who was naturally strongly opposed to any resurgence of the Jewish nation. God is

calling us to reach our community and nation. It starts with prayer – praying by ourselves, praying in our small groups, praying as a church, praying with others in the area with the same burden and vision, walking the boundaries, discerning God's will.

The bottom line is that in the end, the whole of Jerusalem and beyond rolled up their sleeves and rebuilt the wall – the miracle happened. The main thing was that it all started with prayer. There it was rooted. Do we want to see real change in our community? Then it starts with prayer. One of the features of the current movements of God's Spirit in many parts of the world is that the most vibrant parts of church life is prayer. And that extends to the community – people are offered prayer. Community and Government leaders are approached and offered prayer. Prayer is publicly made for them. People pray for their friends and neighbours. People come to Christ – whole communities are changed.

How does it start? The restoration of Jerusalem started when one man wept before God. We so often want revival, but revival starts with us – when we weep before God, when we recognise our weakness, when we see what we can achieve with God's strength. Is that what we want here in this second decade of the 21st Century? Then let's come before God in our weakness and say “Send revival, start with me”.

Nehemiah proved to be a person of prayer and thought which then led to sharing that experience which then led to action. He committed himself to his God given task practically and with the persistence that come from a real relationship with the Lord his God.