

## Nehemiah Sermon – Coping with Hostility

9/3/14

Good morning.

I want to tell you a little about the Book of Nehemiah, something about the Man Nehemiah, and some observations of my own about Nehemiah's attitude to exclusiveness.

### The book

The book of Nehemiah appears now in our Bible as a separate book but was originally combined with the book of Ezra on a single scroll in the Hebrew bible.

It may be part of a larger "history" assembled by someone known as "the Chronicler", the man who put together some other biblical books, the First and Second Book of Chronicles.

These provide a religious retelling of the history of the Jewish nation, over a period of about 600 years from the times of King David right up to the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon. The Chronicler uses already known material (for example from the Book of Kings) and gives it a fresh interpretation, setting out the call of Israel to be a "church" - that is a worshipping community, the people of God.

Whoever the Chronicler was, it is clear that he is not concerned to present us with history as we understand the term but to use and interpret the traditions of the past to convey a teaching, sometimes adjusting the story to make his point.

So the books of Ezra and Nehemiah each comprise a collection of older documents. If you read Nehemiah, you will find it has quite a modern feel to it in some ways – mainly because it includes Nehemiah's personal memoirs written in the first person. He writes, for example, "After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials"; this feels quite fresh and up to date.

I admit it also includes some long lists of difficult names which can be tedious. Don't be put off! Read the book and skip over these lists. I remember a young curate at Whitley Bay (he is now a bishop) who was reading a lesson that had such a list, but not once but TWICE! Second time around he just read "Reuben, Simeon and the rest"!

### The Man

Who was Nehemiah and what are we to make of him?

A man of distinction and significant influence in the court of King Artaxerxes, King of the biggest empire the Middle East had known, Nehemiah gets himself authorised as the

Governor of Judah, and successfully organises the Jews to rebuild the walls and the community despite dangerous and powerful opponents.

How differently do different people see Nehemiah!

Chris spoke of Nehemiah as a man of courage facing up to a difficult and dangerous challenge

Peter spoke of a man of prayer AND action, seizing the moment

For Me? :

When Chris invited me to preach this sermon I expressed some surprise about the subject. For one thing, Nehemiah is not a well know or frequently read book. Also, my recollection of Nehemiah's character was somewhat tainted, of which more later. But you cannot dispute it; he was certainly courageous, certainly devout, a good administrator and resourceful, firm of purpose - not put off by opposition.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem may well have been governors of neighbouring provinces of the Persian Empire and, as such there were probably political as well as community and personal motives for their opposition. Their jealous ridicule comes out quite vividly but they also made the deadly suggestion that Nehemiah was rebelling against the Persian Empire.

Nehemiah (4:1-5) responded by turning to God, "*Hear O our God, for we are despised*", *but goes on – and we can sympathise* - to say "Turn their taunt back on their own heads and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. *Don't* cover their guilt and *don't* let their sin be blotted out from your sight"

All this is a long way from Jesus' prayer, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

St Paul, quoting Proverbs (25:21-22); writes " beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" Jesus is even more generous (Matthew 5: 44) "*I* say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. And (Luke 6:38) "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you".

### Exclusiveness?

So here we come to my concern about Nehemiah. He was a figure of authority and he was ready to use his authority. He clearly was a leader, not to be put off by serious opposition and ridicule from his political enemies.

And it is true that he used his authority and his leadership skills to achieve some good ends, like the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and dealing with the oppression by rich Jews of their poor Jewish neighbours.

However, I am afraid I see some similarities between Nehemiah and Oliver Cromwell. You may remember that in the book "1066 and All That" the Cavaliers are said to be "Wrong but Wromantic" whilst the Roundheads, and their General, Oliver Cromwell, are held to be "Right but Repulsive". There is more than a whiff of the puritanical or pharisaic about Nehemiah. In my view, we see this most clearly in the way he dealt with the issue of mixed marriages.

In accordance with the ancient biblical prohibition and in the fear of losing the distinctiveness of Israel's faith, Nehemiah cracked down on mixed marriages. Nehemiah personally confronted Jews who had foreign wives, cursing them, beating them, even pulling out their hair. His fellow reformer, Ezra the priest, went further, not only denouncing such marriages but forcibly breaking them up. It is worth thinking about that; about what happened to those women and their children. I wonder what Jesus would have done?

So Nehemiah succeeded in building a strong wall around the Jewish community – not just the wall around Jerusalem but a wall of exclusiveness based on racial and religious loyalty.

This objective was not without challenge at the time. Another short Old Testament book to read is a charming novel, the book of Ruth. This book was written at about the same time as Nehemiah's work. In it we learn how a young woman from Moab, a foreigner, marries Boaz, who is the great grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king (and the hero of the Chronicler). In other words, God's greatest favour on Israel was bestowed through a mixed marriage.

Why does this matter to us today?

The Church is still faced with dilemmas about engaging with the world. At one extreme we have churches who call themselves "Exclusive" or "Strict and Peculiar" indicating strongly their distinctiveness from the world.

How much should we engage in politics? Should we refuse to get our hands dirty? How did Christians address issues such as slavery and apartheid and, eventually, disrupted traditional thinking and changed the world? How should we now address current issues that threaten disruption of traditional view such as women bishops, or same sex marriage? Were the bishops who raised their concerns and criticisms of benefits policy wise? Do we aim to be the light of the world, set apart on a lampstand to be a beacon to all but somewhat above the fray? Or are we to be the salt of the earth, mixing in and - by so doing - transforming the world, bringing out its true flavour. It seems we are called to do both!

I have no pat answer, but it seems to me that we have to grapple with such issues as best we can. I think we have base our thinking on love, love of God and love of our neighbour and then to use all God's gifts to help us: to listen to the wisdom of scripture, to listen to the wisdom of fellow Christians and the Church, and to use our own God given reasoning, as we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. Amen

*Gordon Hunt*