

Being busy on God's work is no excuse for injustice.

Nehemiah - we have heard how he was born in captivity and had a responsible, though risky job of cup bearer in the Persian court. We know he had a strong faith as we heard his prayer confessing the sins of the people of Israel in ch 1.

He had never seen Jerusalem but for a Jewish man Jerusalem was a special place the centre of their faith. He heard of its destruction and had this enormous vision that he, Nehemiah, could get the walls re built to protect Jerusalem.

Nehemiah fasted and prayed about this plan for months. What an example to us, what perseverance, what persistence, what courage his faith in his God gave him.

Now in ch 5 we read that Nehemiah is in Jerusalem and busy motivating workers to help re build the walls.

But – like so many groups of people and communities there were problems in relationships, selfish behaviour and oppression of the poor. Selfishness was shown in exploitation of others. So when Nehemiah was in the middle of organising this great work people came to him with grumbles and accusations. How could he keep achieving his vision for Jerusalem, God's city and not be deflected? He came to re build the walls and it probably never occurred to him he would also have to re build the community!

What would be the point of having a safe, walled city if injustice, oppression and sin remained? This was not the city or community the exiled Jews dreamed of returning to one day. Today's church is the people not the building just as the heart of Jerusalem was the people and their faith in God and in following his word. Did their Priests read the books of the law to them? There were strict guidelines in Deuteronomy and Leviticus on how to live God's law and respect fellow man.

What did Nehemiah hear?

- people were without land and had little to eat. The population

was increasing and there was famine.

- Land owners had mortgaged their land and property but rising prices meant debt and inflation wiped out their profit.
- Taxes were high and people had to borrow to pay them. Taxes went to the King of Persia not to welfare or services.
- Then worst of all, wealthy Jews were exploiting fellow Jews. They lent money but when loans were not repaid the rich Jews took lands and even children as slaves. (Lev 25;35-46)

What does this mean to us today? Does it resonate with us?

Does it sound familiar . . . ?

(ask the congregation)

Loss of faith and belief in God

Giles Fraser and St Paul's encampment ... rich bankers

Food banks

Bedroom tax

Lack of compassion in NHS

Modern day slavery and trafficking of children

Payday loans and usury

Loneliness, isolation

Examples of churches (people) responding to the needs

Churches providing food and debt counselling

Soup runs

Alpha

Street pastors

Church run groups

Taking meals to families after hospital surgery or a new baby has been born.

etc

Do we need to ask if we are too busy doing God's work so we ignore or evade the problems in our own community, country, world?

Can we, should we have a vision backed by prayer and fasting?

The PCC has set a few aims for this year that you can see at the back of church.

How about Jesus? Mark 10:32 we heard that John and James missed the impact of what Jesus said about his death as they were selfishly thinking about their own importance and their future.

The disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus missing the importance of children to the Kingdom. Mark 10:13

Then the Pharisees complained to Jesus that the Disciples were picking corn to eat on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were so caught up in their own agenda they could not see what Jesus' ministry was about.

Do we miss the point as we rush on with our own plans or speak without thinking having our own agenda? Stephen in Acts challenged the people as they had forgotten God and did not obey God's law. He was stoned to death for this challenge.

Perhaps we feel we should keep our heads down for fear of ridicule or of taking on more than we can manage?

Perhaps it helps us to hear how Nehemiah managed?

He did not hold back and say he had only come to build the walls.

He acted by denouncing the leaders and officials.

He called a public meeting so he could state the charges and present the evidence of their sin.

He reminded them of the Word of God.

Nehemiah explained how the bad example and bad influence of their conduct was a sin against God's decree. Isaiah 'To be a light to the Gentiles.

Nehemiah set a good example by lending money and corn and called for repentance and restitution. They needed to acknowledge their sin and return to the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus giving back what they had taken.

He explained the seriousness and consequence of their sin and called the leaders to promise to obey the law in front of the people and the priests, giving back property and not collecting debts.

The whole assembly said Amen as an assent to all that was said and done.

Nehemiah did not issue a decree but involved the all the people, leaders and priests in the discussion and decisions. This way everyone knew what was expected of them . . . To obey God's law.

Nehemiah was chosen by God, Israelites were God's chosen people. In the book of the prophet Isaiah we read God knew us before we were born. Being God's people brings responsibilities. . Jesus ministered to all people and we are asked to follow his example.

Micah 6:8

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God . . . ?