

Nehemiah Goes To Jerusalem

Nehemiah chapter 2

This morning I would like us to note three moments in the story of Nehemiah and his rebuilding of Jerusalem.

The first happens after much prayer, and after 3-4 months of waiting, Nehemiah's moment comes, and it comes not because ironically he is filled with great optimism, but actually because of prayer he has occupied a place of monumental sadness. He is cup bearer to the king and the king sees that he is sad - because Nehemiah is not prepared to hide even if this will cost him his job and possibly even his life...

It is worth noting that up to that point Nehemiah's demeanour and the way he did his job had probably endeared him to the king, and won him some favour, so the King is disposed well to Nehemiah, but Nehemiah does not know this.

At this point, the great point, is the Nehemiah does not hide, instead he tells the truth of his great sadness.

I love the idea that the one who has prayed here, the one who has occupied pain and loss, for three months now, the one who has made himself confront the loss of all that is happening to him, he is the one now who is brave, and the one who finds himself in the right place to be able to do something.

So he answers the king....

"May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

And then this the moment on which everything hangs, the moment that tells us that deep in the heart, in the soul of the most powerful, but also the most apparently pagan king in the world at that time, a man who might thought to be beyond reach, something happens...

4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

And that is the moment on which everything turns, because he keeps asking...

7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. 9 So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me

I am reminded of the story of George McLeod building Iona Abbey, and the story he told, so often that every member of the Iona Community in the 1940s onwards would be able to tell it off by heart....

George McLeod needed money to rebuild Iona Abbey but he did not want money from the Church because he did not want to be under its direction...

"I wrote to the richest man I knew. He replied, "There's a good psychiatrist at 214 Bath Street - perhaps you should see him for the good of your health and for the good of the Church of Scotland."

Then I wrote to the second richest man I knew, but he hasn't written back to me yet, and as that was fifty years ago, I don't suppose he will now.

Then I wrote to Sir James Lithgow. I asked him for £5,000. He invited me to spend the night. This surprised me because we were not very close: he was building battleships and I was already a pacifist. Before I left, he asked, "If I give you £5000 will you give up your pacifism?" "Not on your life!" I replied. Then he said, "Then I will give you £5000"

In the words of Hudson Taylor, God's work done God's way will never lack God's supply.

Sabotage

The next point comes from the next verse...

Nehemiah 2:10

10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

Note here that people of middle power, people who sit in the middle rank, people who are outsiders, but want to have a way of getting in, those people are the ones who are going to cause trouble.

I have spoken quite a lot recently to a man called Tod Bolsinger who is an expert writer in the field of Church renewal. He has written of the way in which Church's need to adapt to the current changed secular world. He uses as his analogy the way in which the Lewis-Clark expedition, when they were trying reach the pacific, and to carry their canoes across the rocky mountains, they had to travel in a country and a way for which they had not prepared. So there is boldness, and there is insight, but the thing that strikes me most about Tod Bolsinger is that he writes from the place of his greatest pain.

He tells the story of being in charge of a Church renewal programme, and that was to bring together the whole PCUSA in a way of being different. Everyone had been contacted, and everyone brought on board, but some point, word got out that he was going to fail, that his plan was ludicrous, and everyone stopped inviting him to meetings and he knew that he was losing support.

He says that is what taught me about sabotage in the Church, that people who are around when you are doing something, will work to make you fail.

That is a reality.

Reading the story of George McLeod, there are plenty of people who worked to not make him succeed. His story is one of tenacious resistance in the face of his enemies.

You will always have people who are against you, and they are lurking here.

It is almost as if anything worth doing, God wants to draw out into the open human resistance, and he wants to prove and improve those who are with him, to let them realise that he has got this. He starts it, and and then he is going to make it difficult.

Inspecting the Walls

Then what happens is that Nehemiah inspects the walls by night.

This is an inner private journey that he must make alone, to inhabit the size of the task, and to understand what it is that he is facing.

There is something here about facing our task, which is to be able to share the gospel with our communities, that we are failing to do this.

But then there is a moment when this must become public, because Nehemiah realises that he cannot do this alone, he must say to the people - this is the problem that we are facing.

It does actually relate to buildings, and that our building is not doing the job that we need it to do - which is to protect us, and our gates are not doing the job that we need them to do which is to relate to the outside world - the people of God need both walls and gates.

And our walls and our gates are not working ,neither of them

And he shares this with the people...

17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

And this is the story of Nehemiah chapter 2 - we need to begin this great work, we need to do this together.

I love the way that Nehemiah changes the story here, that they thought their story was one of abandonment and decline, but having inhabited the problem, he now simply invokes the possibility of renewal.

"Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace"

There is a sense in which all the wrestling, all the journeying, all the praying of the last three months has allowed him to say this with a new conviction.

What was George McLeod's great sermon - we shall rebuild.

We shall rebuild

This Church, to be a beacon of hope for this nation

To be the very bearers of the words of Christ

To be a place where the walls are built to shelter and to cradle sacred space

And this will be a place where the gates are rebuilt so that people may come and go

From the East and the West, the North and the South

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed

AMEN