

“WITH SWORD AND TROWEL”

Nehemiah 1:1 – 2:10

I've been reading through the book of *Nehemiah* over the past couple of weeks as part of the daily Bible reading scheme I use and it struck me as a good story with which to begin the New Year. As usual, I got on and jotted down a few preliminary notes for this morning, then – as I often do – looked back through my old sermons to see if there were any useful points I could draw on for this from previous reflections on the passage. I discovered that I'd only preached on this book a couple of times since I've been in Lichfield and the last occasion was at New Year in 2001/2, just as we were starting to embark on our building project. The story of Nehemiah obviously contains the kind of message that fits in with new beginnings, so it's well worth re-visiting this morning – although this will be a completely different sermon, so don't think you can nod off because you've already heard it.

I like the book of *Nehemiah*. It's worth taking a few minutes to read through some time: there's a lot of lists of names in some chapters, but you can skip across those and follow the story of a man who heard God's call and got to grips with the implications of it against all odds. It's a tale of someone who managed to harness the resources and enthusiasm of a wide range of people in order to complete a project that most others would have thought impossible. It's the story of a new beginning for a man and for his community, which is why it's such a good way to start the New Year.

Just to fill you in on the background. Nehemiah is a Hebrew who has been deported along with many of his people to Babylon. There he has risen to the position of cupbearer to the Emperor, the great Artaxerxes. It's an important and privileged and dangerous position, which gives Nehemiah the opportunity to speak to the Emperor, as well as putting him in the front line of his anger if his mood becomes difficult. Nehemiah's story, as we have it recorded in the Old Testament, begins with him receiving some visitors from his home city of Jerusalem, who tell him of the appalling state the city has fallen into under the few people who still live there.

Jerusalem is obviously an immensely symbolic place for Nehemiah and his people, and he is greatly distressed to hear of what's going on there. He prays to God about the situation and a couple of months later takes his life in his hands and seizes the opportunity to speak to Artaxerxes about it. The Emperor grants Nehemiah leave to go and visit Jerusalem and gives him letters of recommendation for other rulers who are to provide him with safe passage and some of the materials needed for rebuilding the city.

The part of the story we have just read tells of Nehemiah's initial response to the news he receives. When he finally arrives back at Jerusalem, for a while, Nehemiah just wanders around without really letting on to his companions what is on his mind. God has given him an insight into what needs doing and has

provided him with a vision for the future. He goes and surveys the situation and forms some kind of plan in his own mind, but does not, as yet, share it with the rest of them. When eventually he does decide that the rest of the people will need to know what's going to happen, it is interesting what he says.

In 2:17,18, he tells the others that they are to rebuild the walls and restore Jerusalem to its former glory. And he introduces that by telling them that this is of God. He talks about the circumstances leading up to this project and how God's hand has clearly been upon it. He mentions that God has spoken to him and that he has also had the help of the King. As we begin this New Year and as we look forward to the ways in which we might move forward as part of God's people here in Lichfield, we must not forget that God continues to speak to us and to put ideas, projects and visions into our hearts and minds.

But, as is always the case when God's people catch the vision and begin to move, there is opposition. Some of the enemies of God's people (Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem) get to hear what's going on and begin by ridiculing the project and, later in the story, by actively trying to prevent it going forward. I have no doubt that there will be things which prove difficult along the way as we try to serve God and follow his will for us within the life of this community. And that may well be the case for other things that you have set yourself to do this year, the new beginnings that you have resolved to follow. But we can take heart from Nehemiah's response.

In v20, Nehemiah states his trust and faith in God – *“The God of heaven will give us success.”* He knows that this project is not something that he has embarked upon as a foolish whim. It has already meant that he has had to put himself in a position of danger. He has struggled already with many of the issues involved. And his eyes are wide open about the possibilities of problems in the future. He believes that it's God's plan – and if it's God's plan it cannot fail. So he states with no hesitation here, *“We will start rebuilding.”*

The year ahead is full of unknowns. We cannot really predict what it will hold for us. But as God calls us to work with and for him, our resolve is to move forward, to continue fulfilling the vision that he has given us – to do something rather than simply to sit back and think about it or discuss it or postpone it. There are all kinds of needs and opportunities around us here – and, as you will have heard at the recent Church Meeting, God has clearly been speaking to various people within this congregation about actually doing something that will make a difference in this community. So let's briefly look at some of the pointers here in Nehemiah's story and see if they might help us in our vision to be *“a church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.”*

Firstly, **Nehemiah was passionate about the situation.** Some of the people who have been left in Jerusalem while the rest of the population have been deported travel to Susa, where Nehemiah is with the exiles, and tell him what a state the city is in. Jerusalem is hugely symbolic for the Hebrews and, for them it is the place where God's glory should be most clearly demonstrated. Now it lies in ruins and with the ruined city is, in a sense, the ruined reputation of their God. In an international culture where each nation had its own gods who helped them in battle and commerce and art and everything else, the unspoken claim of each nation was "My god's better than your god", depending on who was winning. So a temple that had been destroyed was a sign that that particular god wasn't much good.

Nehemiah feels that keenly. Things are not as they should be. He anticipates the ridicule of his enemies – and he weeps (*1:4,5*). This is not what should be happening and he passionately wants the situation to change. As we look around us, we see a world that is broken and not as it should be. People are struggling with situations that are not what God wants. Some of our neighbours and colleagues and friends are hurting, are despairing. And then people say, "So where's your God in all this, then?" Do we care? Does it sadden us? Or have we got used to it and don't mind too much because *we* seem to be OK? Pray that God will give you a passion for those who are hurting – and, what's more, a passion to do something about it.

That's what Nehemiah did – **he prayed into the situation.** He asked God to help him. And this book is suffused with prayer. In the passage we've read this morning he both pleads with God – acknowledging his own part in what's happening – and sends up a quick prayer to God when he really needs his help in responding to Artaxerxes' direct question (*1:4ff, 2:4*). If we are to do any good in this community we need to pray – to pray that God will give us a real passion to get involved, to pray that he will show us exactly what to do, to pray that he will release the resources we need to do the job. We've started to do that as we meet together on the last Saturday of the month to pray into this situation, but keep praying in your own personal prayers as well.

We then see that **Nehemiah used his contacts and his context.** If you're the cupbearer to the leader of one of the largest empires in the Middle East – effectively his trusted confidant – then you have a direct line to someone who can help. Having prayed for God's wisdom in answering the King's question, Nehemiah asks directly for what he needs – leave of absence, resources and protection. He was in a position where he could do that, so he used creatively what was to hand.

If we want to move forward with plans and projects here, then we need to follow that example. This community is still very much one in which the church has freedom to get involved and, indeed, has a good reputation which has been built up over many years. There is help at hand both in terms of advice

from local authorities (who, you may recall, were very helpful with our building project when that started) and in terms of resources – volunteers and funding from local businesses and charities. And each of you here has a network of contacts that can be called on in some way to make a difference in this city.

Once Nehemiah had some kind of commitment from the King to help out with what was necessary, he set off back to Jerusalem and **he assessed the situation**. Having been away in Susa for quite a while, Nehemiah wasn't quite sure what he'd find, so he went and had a good look (2:11ff). He surveyed the damage and worked out what needed to be done. When God calls us to get involved in his work, he expects us to think carefully about what is needed, to assess the situation and target our help and the resources he's given us. We've done that before – looking at research about children's and youth ministry led us initially to target primary aged children by appointing a children's worker before we took on a youth worker: looking at the needs of the many older and retired folk around the church led us into the Monday Lunch and similar activities: recognising that most of the shops in Lichfield that weren't charity shops or hairdressers were coffee shops tempered the enthusiasm of some for opening a coffee shop here. If we are to move forward in joining God in what he's going to do here in Lichfield, then we need to make sure we know what we're going to do, as Nehemiah did.

It wasn't long before Nehemiah had sussed out what needed to be done, so he drew up his plan of action, a plan that **involved many other people**. One of the things I really like about this story is the way in which Nehemiah was able to draft in so many people and get them to participate in the rebuilding of the city. He gave each little group of them a manageable part of the task to complete and from the beginning of chapter 3 there's a record of who did what. Some of it was done by groups of colleagues – the priests, the goldsmiths, the perfume-makers. Some was done by families working together on some of the gates. Some was done by people from particular communities or areas. But they all did what they could to help out in the overall project. They were involved in God's work, bringing glory to him in the rebuilding of his city.

David Sheppard, the one-time Bishop of Liverpool, tells the story of some men who were working at a cathedral. Someone asked a few of them what they were doing. One said he was putting the hinges on a door; another said he was carving a window frame; another said he was building a cathedral. If we get involved in any project here in this community, we may well be doing something apparently insignificant – keeping accounts, arranging meetings, making coffee or whatever – but if someone asks you what you're doing, however menial your involvement may appear to you, the reply should be "I'm building the Kingdom".

As we have already noted, however – and as you’ll see as you read through this book – it was not all plain sailing. Nehemiah was very much the realist and **he faced the difficulties** that this project threw up. Those three people we mentioned earlier – Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem – did not want Jerusalem rebuilt, for all kinds of reasons. To start with, they simply ridiculed the Hebrews as they planned their programme of rebuilding. Then they mobilised active opposition with a plot to stop the work going ahead. Nehemiah got wind of that and made his preparations – once again involving prayer. But he also took practical steps to ensure that everyone was protected. The workers had their tools in one hand and their weapons ready in the other. (My grandfather, who wrote music for our brass band, once composed a march inspired by this entitled *With Sword And Trowel*.) Nehemiah didn’t ignore or underestimate the problems, but took sensible steps to deal with them.

When we are engaged in working for God, in furthering the interests of his Kingdom, then we will face setbacks – there’s no doubt about that. But we can take steps to mitigate the situation and ensure that the effects of any opposition are minimised or rendered impotent. And a large part of what’s involved in that is remembering what it’s all about. If you’ve got your Bible open, flick over to *4:14* where Nehemiah gives some very sound advice: “*Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.*” This is God’s doing, he tells them, so remember that he’s in charge and he can help you do amazing things.

That’s actually emphasised in *6:16* when the work is pretty well complete. Even the opposition “*realised that this work had been done with the help of our God.*” As we move into the New Year and into new possibilities in our work here, that is the thing to remember. Above all else, if we are listening to God, passionate about the work of his Kingdom, ready to pray to him as well as sussing out what’s happening around us, then, even if there is opposition, we can count on God’s help. The great and awesome God will give us the strength, the determination, the wisdom that we need to join him in what he’s already started to do. I have a feeling that this year could be a very significant one in the life of this church and this community. Let’s keep praying to, listening to and relying on God to lead us through it.