

St. Brandon's 3 Sept 2023

Nehemiah 1; Ps 102; Matt 16: 21-26

Building: Nehemiah 1

Twenty five years ago, in early September 1998, St Brandon's marked the twelfth Sunday after Trinity and looked forward to Harvest festival. Services kept the rhythm of the seasons in the ancient village church, as they'd done for centuries.

Meanwhile, twenty-five years ago in London, I was just starting to explore the possibility that God was calling me -me? – to serve in the church rather than teaching. I wasn't the only one in our church then thinking like this, so our wise young vicar gathered us for a series of evenings to share thoughts, pray and read the Bible together, taking turns to lead as we studied the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah? I confess I'd never read it – I wonder if you have? There's a prize for the first person to find Nehemiah in the church Bibles and call out the page number of where it starts...

(461, roughly halfway through the OT and near the end of the 'history' section – we're in the final century of OT history)

Had I known in 1998 that I'd be here in Brancepeth, preaching the first of 3 sermons based on Nehemiah, and doing so as your vicar, I simply wouldn't have believed it.

But God our Builder takes us beyond our expectations into new journeys, challenges and joys.

Had the congregation of St Brandon's known then what was about to happen and how costly in every sense the following years would be, I don't think they would

have believed it either. **But God our Builder takes us beyond our expectations into new journeys, challenges and joys.**

There will be opportunities in the coming weeks and especially during the Building St Brandon's weekend, to ponder this further. And please do read John Pearce's wonderful piece in this month's newsletter too.

Now lets get stuck into Nehemiah!

This book follows directly from the book of Ezra, high priest in Jerusalem when Nehemiah was eventually governor, and the two books are count as one in the Hebrew scriptures, giving complementary accounts of this key stage of Jewish history. Today we Crys read us chapter 1 and I'll also dip briefly into Chapter 2. Do have your readings sheet, or your Bible open,

Here we go!

It's the 5th century BC in Susa, winter capital of Persia, where Nehemiah, whose memoirs make up much of this book, tells his story. Nehemiah's a Jew, one of many whose families were deported from Israel by invading Babylonian forces about 150 years earlier, leaving just a remnant of Jews in Jerusalem. The Babylonian Empire has since fallen to Persia and a larger group of Jews, led by Ezra the priest, has returned to Jerusalem, where they've rebuilt the Temple as the first stage of restoration. But Artaxerxes, the next Persian King, has ordered all building by the Jews to stop.

So here's Nehemiah, trusted servant, cup bearer to King Artaxerxes, who hears from his brother Hanani what he's seen recently in Jerusalem, that the wall is broken

down, its gates burned and the Jewish people in great distress. It's as if the state of the stones is a picture of the state of the nation and people. There's much brokenness and despair at the sorry state of their once great city. Throughout the prophecies of the old testament the state of Jerusalem, city and temple are a barometer for the state of the people in relation to God. Care for the holy city and its holy places indicates the priority they place on worshipping God, following God's commandments, living as God's people.

Thus, when Nehemiah hears this bad news, his first response is to weep and cry out to God. As I read v.4 again for us, lets reflect on *our* response when we hear bad news of our homes and loved ones:

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

On the morning of 16 September 1998, when the church was a smouldering ruin, people came here to pray. There was weeping and mourning, fasting and much prayer as the loss was so keenly felt. We will remember that especially in our early morning service on Sunday 17th, when we'll again walk around the building and pray before the God of heaven.

I firmly believe that none of the rebuilding and restoration which followed would have taken place without that prayer. And our first response in times of disaster and devastation will always be to pray, before the God of heaven, God our Builder, who alone can rebuild and restore our lives.

The rest of chapter 1, except the final sentence, is Nehemiah's prayer. God brings him through days- well months- of mourning and fasting and births within him the leadership and plan that will be needed.

The prayer begins by looking to God in heaven, great and awesome, loving and faithful within the covenant made with Abraham for all generations. Nehemiah prays on behalf of his people, even though he's 900 miles away in a foreign court, just as we join our Ukrainian friends praying today for their people, many miles away and in trouble.

Importantly, Nehemiah begins with himself his family and his father's family, confessing the disobedience and wickedness which led to the people's scattering and exile. He's very straightforward: 'we have not obeyed the commands, laws and decrees you gave your servant Moses'. There's no pretence, for Nehemiah knows God sees the hearts of his people and sin cannot be hidden from God.

This also points to later in the story when the teaching of God's commands is vital to the restoration of the city and nation, rebuilding the walls and the people's faith go hand in hand.

Yet even as he repents, Nehemiah has hope, hope in the covenant God who hears the prayers of his children, the God whose promises can be trusted.

So he quotes these words from Deuteronomy, in verse 9:

⁸ "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.

That's the promise which becomes Nehemiah's guiding vision for the immense project he undertakes. It's the promise in God our builder, who is faithful to the covenant made with his people, through all generations.

Nehemiah stands on this: it gives him strength for this hour, and strength to take action when the time is right.

So he asks God to grant him favour in the presence of 'this man'. To Nehemiah, whilst a loyal servant to the mega powerful King of Persia, he is just 'this man', when addressing the God of heaven. He knows that God's power will always be greater, and *only* in *God's* power will he succeed.

As I close, a brief dip into Chapter 2. Do read it at home, read the whole book, borrow a church Bible if you wish.

Four months pass with prayer, mourning and fasting, from winter and spring, before the moment is right for Nehemiah to speak to King Artaxerxes.

Such times of waiting are tough, but in them God changes us as we pray and trust in him.

The day comes when the King asks Nehemiah why he's looking sad; his cupbearer tells him about Jerusalem, to which the King replies, 'So what is your request'.

Nehemiah asks to go home. He also has a list in his back pocket of what he'll need to rebuild the walls, knowing full well the King can provide all these resources as Nehemiah makes his journey west through the empire, arranging it as he goes.

The God of faithful love is also the God of practical provision, as this very building bears witness.

Nehemiah is a man of prayerful action, as were the men and women in this place in 1998, who acted to ensure the building was saved and restored, who relied on God's faithfulness and allowed God our Builder to take them beyond their expectations into new journeys, challenges and joys.

May we too be ready for all that God our Builder calls us to, as God continues to build today.