

Brancepeth 10th September

Psalm 43

Nehemiah 2:11-20

Matthew 7:24-27

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘Then I replied to them, ‘The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building’’ (Neh. 2: 20a).

Today we’ve heard two readings on the theme of building – this, as I’m sure you’ve gathered, is part of the run-up to the Building St Brandon’s events next weekend. In a sense, these are quite different sorts of readings.

On the one hand, we have Jesus’ vivid parable in Matthew 7, the culmination of the Sermon on the Mount. Those who listen to his teaching and act on it, Jesus tells us, are like a builder building on rock; those who hear but do not act are like a builder building on sand. Whether you have a lifetime of experience in construction, or you’ve ever built a sandcastle, the analogy Jesus is making feels relatively self-explanatory: rock is solid, permanent, dependable; sand is changeable, unreliable, slippery. Only one of those is a foundation which can withstand the world; only one of those is a foundation on which we want to build our lives.

On the other hand, we have this historical account (sort of political memoir) of the figure of Nehemiah. This is steeped in detail, planning, surveillance, political wrangling, and even bureaucracy. Last Sunday we encountered Nehemiah as he learns of the sorry state of Jerusalem’s walls and gates, and his response - that of weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying. The Nehemiah of this Sunday’s readings, then, is a man with a mission. Having gained permission from the king to rebuild the walls, we read of him in Jerusalem: surveying the damage, recruiting labourers, and defending the building work against real, and significant, opposition.

In contrast to the simplicity of Jesus’ parable, it’s easy to become disoriented by all this detail. However, I want to suggest that in the midst of the action, there is a constant in this passage, which draws us much closer to Jesus’ parable. This is the graciousness, faithfulness, and authority of God, to which Nehemiah repeatedly, and consistently, testifies. And, I’d like to suggest, something remarkable happens when Nehemiah does.

‘Then I replied to them, ‘The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building’’.

If we look first to verses 11-16, we read of Nehemiah beginning his work in Jerusalem. He isn't there for very long before he visits the walls; before he goes to see with his own eyes what he has heard. What he finds is a picture of devastation, of broken walls, of gates that have been burned to the ground. It's not entirely clear if there has been a recent attack or whether this a broader state of dilapidation, but either way the image is one of devastation. And, as Anna said last Sunday, these were not simply walls – throughout the Old Testament, the state of Jerusalem is a barometer for the state of the people's relationship with God. This dilapidation is a real problem. It's also worth noting that Nehemiah does all his surveillance under the cover of darkness. If in verse 16 this might seem a little paranoid, by verse 19 it's clear Nehemiah is rather being prudent. The local officials Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are powerful men and they're going to be both obstructive and violent.

Then, having surveyed the scene, Nehemiah moves to rebuilding. I think it's worth taking a moment to look again at verses 17 and 18: 'Then I said to them: 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.' I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good.'

I don't know about you, but I don't usually agree to do prolonged physical labour on the request of someone I've only just met. And if you're wondering, like I did, how much freedom they had to say no, it's interesting to see in chapter 3 that some people are named as *not* joining in. It seems there was some genuine choice in the matter. Somehow, remarkably, what Nehemiah said to them was compelling enough that they started building.

We can't know exactly what he said, of course, or how many conversations he had, or whether there was much back and forth. Either way, it seems there were a range of factors at play – not suffering disgrace, for example, as well as the support of the king.

But I think significant here is what Nehemiah testifies about the character of God. Throughout the first two chapters of the book, Nehemiah has consistently asserted the faithfulness, graciousness, and authority of God. In 1:4 he prays to 'the great and awesome God who keeps covenant'; in 2:8 he says that 'the gracious hand of my God was upon me'; and in 2:20 we hear his striking affirmation that God has authority over all political threat: 'The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building'. And here, in front of the people, he does the same: he tells them that the gracious hand of God has been upon him. And, with some other forms of encouragement too, they begin to build.

None of this is to say that Nehemiah is naïve about the challenge ahead. This is a man who spent months weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying, before he moved to action. This is

also a man who is realistic about worldly opposition. And yet he's keen to assert God's sovereignty over these challenges. There's building to be done; but, it's God who will give them success.

It's worth saying here that the success of the God of heaven isn't always success on our terms. For Nehemiah, this is a project ordained by God. And, as we'll hear next week, while broader concerns about personal conduct persist, in practical terms, construction is completed. However, we all know that our attempts at faithful living don't always yield the results we'd like. The success of the God of heaven doesn't always look like success as we would see it, or success as we would like it. It *is* the God of heaven who will give us success, but not always – perhaps rarely – as we expect.

It's also worth saying that there's a second half to verse 20. Following Nehemiah's grand declaration of God's authority, he says to his opponents, 'you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.' Whether he's making a political point here, or making broader claims about Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem and their relationship with God, it isn't hugely comfortable to read. The walls are most definitely keeping people out, as well, of course, as marking those inside and their commitment to God.

But all this being said, there is something powerful going on when Nehemiah testifies to the character of God – to God's graciousness, faithfulness, and authority. Through his encouragement, the people start building, and destruction and ruin turn into construction and craftsmanship. Nehemiah testifies to the character of God, and something remarkable happens.

Before I finish, I thought I would mention that while writing this sermon, I found myself reminded of a church I went to as a teenager – for those with any sense of Birmingham geography: in Aston, opposite Villa Park. They had there a slot every Sunday titled 'What's God been doing?', and it was an open floor, for anyone to come up and say where they'd experienced God that week. Sometimes the stories were extraordinary – answered prayers in seemingly intractable situations. But more often they were not – they were rather stories of peace, stories of courage, stories of God's goodness day by day. Every week, we both told and heard accounts of God's graciousness, faithfulness, and authority. Unlike the people of Jerusalem, or indeed Brancepeth, we didn't undertake any huge building projects – or not while I was there. But I firmly believe that these accounts were nevertheless significant in building the Kingdom of God.

'Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building''.

Amen.