

The story of Nehemiah is a 2500 year old story set in a middle eastern culture far removed from our lifestyle today. But despite the distance between us and this ancient Judean character, I believe there is a great deal to learn about rebuilding and setting our vision.

First of all, the context. The book of Nehemiah follows the book of Ezra and many feel that the books should be read together as part one and part two. They chronicle the return of the people from Babylon where they had been in exile for many years. The book of Nehemiah tells the story of how Jerusalem was being rebuilt.

Let's think a little about how Nehemiah reacted when he heard the news from Jerusalem of the state of the walls and the people:

### **1. He was distraught**

When he had heard of the disaster that had befallen Jerusalem what did he do? The most human of reactions – he wept! All was in ruin, to be upset was a natural reaction. Possibly all sorts of feelings went through his mind. What if things had been different? If only I had been there. What if we had trained our armies better?

### **2. He prayed fervently**

As he said, 'I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God-of-Heaven.'

If we look at the prayer he made in a little more depth, what he said was interesting:

'I'm praying day and night in intercession for your servants' - not just a quick prayer, but fervent prayer. The sort of prayer that is always at the front of your mind. This of prayer that is all consuming.

As we begin to rebuild our new post pandemic church here at Hounslow especially, but truthfully wherever we are we all need to pray, fervently, not just a quick prayer in the shower in the morning, but one that is with us constantly. As the apostle Paul says

*1 Thessalonians 5:16-18*

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Perhaps when we next meet to talk about the way forward the question should not be *'what do we think we should do'*, but more *'what has our prayer and study helped us to understand about God's call to us as a church'*.

Nehemiah's success was founded in his prayer and reflection. We need to take time to pray and reflect, individually and as a church.

3. **He took responsibility seriously.** Nehemiah accepted that the past was less than perfect. He accepted the wrongdoing of his people, but he also accepted his part in that wrongdoing. He could have been extremely proud of the Jewish people, defended them up to the hilt, but he didn't. He laid it on the line to God,

*'7-9 "We've treated you like dirt: We haven't done what you told us, haven't followed your commands, and haven't respected the decisions you gave to Moses your servant.'*

Now I am not going to suggest that we take responsibility for the pandemic, of course not, but I wonder if in our heart of hearts we have *'followed God's commands'...* to love our neighbour as ourself' (Mark 12.31) or have taken time to worship *'God in spirit and truth'*(John 4.24). Have we fully looked after God's creation or has our passion to save creation from destruction been forgotten? What has happened to our passion to help the poor and vulnerable? The need is greater than it has ever been.

The truth is that priorities we are called to have emerged from this pandemic as even more demanding than they were before.

1. People are frightened, anxious not sure what is coming next. For some, leaving home is suddenly a huge thing.
2. Support networks that were in place for the vulnerable amongst are just not there for so many people.
3. The world's poor or poorer and in many cases what support was there has disintegrated. Our government alone has made massive cuts to foreign aid, just at a time when it is so desperately needed.
4. Our climate crisis is worsening and the fear is the other immense issues surrounding us may distract us from this immense task.

The walls of our society are broken. Our world is broken.

We can quite easily be despondent. What can we do? How can we begin to help tackle these terrible events. Add to that our own more local fears, 'What if people don't come back to church?', 'what if people have changed their priorities, gotten used to a lazier Sunday morning'. Or at a more practical level, 'will it be safe for me to go out to church'.

There are so many what if's, as I am sure there were in Nehemiah's time. But let's take our lesson from Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a master strategist and a great leader, with crystal clear vision for what God wanted done. More of that next week.

But for Nehemiah all of this was underpinned by the time he took to pray and reflect and plan. And then, and only then he was ready to rebuild.

One last thought. There is a story of a man who owned a large farm and on his death it was halved and given to his two children. All went fine for many years until they started to argue until the older child decided to dig a deep ditch between the two of them. The Second child was so angry with this that he sent for a carpenter and asked him to build a giant fence to keep out his sibling, 'Fifty feet tall' he demanded. A while later he came back and was stunned to see that rather than build a tall fence the carpenter had built a bridge across the divide. 'Why did you do that?' he demanded to know. 'Because what you asked for and what you need are two different things' was the reply.

My prayer is that we too will take the time to pray and reflect and share with each other what we feel God is calling us to do, but I also hope we are prepared to be surprised by a God who is full of surprises!