

Walls and Gates (Unless the Lord Builds the House)

Nehemiah 3:1-5, Psalm 127

Having heard part of Nehemiah 3 read this morning you may be thinking, "What on earth is he going to get from this lot?" When I've finished you may conclude that the answer is "precious little"! But I hope not. For this is Scripture, and we have been allowed by the grace of God to have this information preserved for us. These matter-of-fact building construction records of nearly 2500 years ago have come down to us for a Divine purpose. The Bible itself proclaims that all scripture is inspired by God. It is God - breathed. But inspired and inspiring are not the same things. You may be sure when you read the Bible that it is inspired, but you may not find it all equally inspiring. You may not, for example, find the genealogy in Matthew chapter one as inspiring as the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five to seven. I must confess to approaching Nehemiah 3 as though it was going to be uninspiring. It seemed to read like a script for TV's "Grand Designs" or like one of those tiresome Church Histories that list in detail who built what when over the last 150 years. I was wrong. This apparently very ordinary narrative account of the rebuilding of Jerusalem is packed with spiritual food. God's breath is clearly in it. There are here issues central to our living as Christians in the twenty first century. It is inspired and inspiring.

So let me take an overview of what was actually going on. It will reveal principles by which we may live and work for the Lord today. And I would encourage each of you to receive from it anything you think the Lord may be saying.

1 The Purpose of the Work

The essential starting point for any work of God is its purpose. Why are we doing this? What is the vision? Big challenges require big inspiration. For the enormous task of rebuilding

Jerusalem, Nehemiah had to hold before the people a purpose that would set their hearts on fire. And to find it we have to sneak back into chapter 2:17. *"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.' I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work."*

The fate of Jerusalem and the glory of God were bound together in Jewish thought - and still largely are. The purpose of Nehemiah's rebuilding was no less than the glory of God. And for that most Jews would work their socks off.

Historically, churches have set up all kinds of programmes just because they seemed like a good idea at the time, or to keep up with the spiritual Jones's in the church down the road. But often there has been no God-given vision or purpose. Equally, churches have kept ailing programmes running for years after the Lord's vision for them or the need for them has gone. Both are mistakes. We need a God-given, ongoing, God glorifying vision for our actions. That is the ultimate purpose of the Body of Christ worldwide and should be of every congregation that is part of it.

2 The Pattern of the Work

This Jerusalem rebuild required a huge coordinated effort. Hundreds of people were involved. In chapter 3 alone 38 individuals are named and rebuilders are drawn from 42 different groups of people. And it is evident that for the glory of God and the honour of Jerusalem they are prepared to work hard together. The work of repairing is going on in 12 places, building in two, rebuilding in four, and setting up the city gates in six. That is some scheme, and what an amazing witness to the faith of Israel it must have been to the surrounding peoples. Some of Jesus' parables are about servants either using their talents or burying them; either found working when the master returns or slacking. His point is that God calls for diligence and application

in the use of our time and gifts. The glory of God is not revealed to the world by a lazy church but by one that works for the Kingdom in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit.

Wayne Grudem simply concludes from all this that "The church is a place to work, not a place to rest." I agree with that, although I would add that there does come a time in life when we must ease up and eventually stop. I hope we all honour and thank those among us who have done their bit for the Lord faithfully over many years, and have earned their retirement.

Nevertheless, the truth still stands that many Christians could do more. One coach describes a professional football game as "22 men on the field desperately in need of rest; 50,000 people in the stands desperately in need of exercise." Church can be like that. Some dear souls need to get out of the stands and exercise their gifts and others need to get off the field at times so they can get some rest. The Body of Christ is a place to work for the Lord and I rejoice that here in St Andrews so many people are active in so many different ways. Let us continue to be about the master's business.

3 The People in the work

God uses all kinds. In Nehemiah's list there are rulers, priests, Levites, men, women, professional craftsmen and outsiders.

There was a place for everyone and a job for everyone. There was no place for parading rank, status or privilege, whether social, ethnic or religious. Everyone was welcome on equal terms to make his or her contribution for the Glory of God. Eternal purposes took precedence over human divisions.

Teamwork was another characteristic of this holy endeavour.

With many individuals and groups working on the continuous city wall, it would be unavoidable that different teams would have to work alongside each other, rub up against each other - and get along!

The chapter is full of references to A working next to B, B working next to C, and C's work adjoining D's etc. Joined up thinking and action was critical. Disjointedness or self-interest

here would have spelled disaster. Regard for one's neighbour's efforts was essential, so that the many parts came together with integrity and one solid edifice to the glory of God arose from the wreckage of the past. This sense of oneness of purpose, this losing of oneself in the interests of the whole body is a key characteristic of our Christian discipleship. For example, Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17 (that we may be one); Paul's teaching that in Christ we all belong to each other; his warnings against selfish ambition, however laudable the cause; his teaching about the body and its many parts, with no part inferior to the others. Discipleship is teamwork; Jesus called 12 not one. He sent them out two by two, not singly. All these things shout to us that we are together in this thing called the Body of Christ and that we need to respect, support and pray for each other.

Comment on Canterbury.

We cannot be solitary disciples or indeed independent congregations. We need each other, for that is the way God has ordained it and that's the way he works.

4 The Places of the Work

This work was mainly on walls and gates. That may mean little to us now but then it was very significant. Most obviously, a city's walls were there to provide protection from outside. But they did more than that: they established identities and set boundaries.

First, identities. Being a dweller within the walls told the surrounding nations not just where you lived, but who you were, and probably what you believed and who you worshipped. And you were either in or out of the city. There might be houses in the walls, but they counted as in! In rebuilding the walls, Nehemiah was re-establishing the people's identity under God. Good Christian leadership, at small group or wider church level, has a duty to help people to establish and understand who they are in Christ and to explore all that that means.

Second, boundaries. The walls marked the line beyond which it might not be safe to go. I mean that the security and values of

Jerusalem might not apply outside its walls. Stepping outside increased the risk of exposure to physical danger and inner spiritual temptation. Nehemiah re-established that boundary wall in his day. Christian leadership too is about helping God's people to understand where the boundaries of behaviour lie. Not to dictate, but to illuminate. Not to pen people up in a narrow way of life, but to try and keep them from harm and point them to the way of holiness.

It may be a challenging call, and we may feel ill equipped for it, and we will get it wrong sometimes. But the church in these days needs to find again its voice in standing up for what is right, just, true and Godly in Society. And we need to be ready to display that same discernment in the ordering of our own morality and spirituality within the life of the Church itself.

Gates and Doors. Returning to Jerusalem, there was one more place they worked - they rebuilt the gates and re-hung the doors. Doors are necessary for access and exit. Without gates the citizens are trapped inside and non-citizens are excluded.

Jerusalem had several gates facing different directions and having different names to suit their purpose. The lesson is plain if we will accept it. The Church needs to allow access for those outside, from whatever direction they approach and for whatever reason they come, and egress for the people inside.

What we are and what we do must proclaim 'welcome'. Christ said "*I am the door*", by which he meant of course that he is the only way into the Father's house. That is a given. But we need to be a church providing many and varied doors of opportunity through which people may come and find Christ, THE door, and through him all the riches of salvation. I am thankful to God for the many ways in which the life and work of this congregation today says 'welcome'. We need to go on doing that and doing it more and better. For some not-yet Christians, we ourselves will *in person* BE the door to faith in Christ. Through friendship offered, love shared, concern expressed, help given, witness borne, prayers made, you can be somebody else's door - the one that leads them

into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. There can be no greater privilege. The other purpose of doors is to let people out. I would simply make the point that has been made so often before - there is a lost world out there. That is the mission field - the home, shopping centre, workplace, places of our recreation. So let's encourage each other to see that and be an outward looking and an outgoing people, so that the world might see, hear and believe.

Conclusion

Sir Winston Churchill was renowned for his fondness for alcohol. One day he was scheduled to make a speech before a small gathering. The chairman introduced him by saying "If all the spirits consumed by Sir Winston were poured into this room, it would reach up to here on the wall." He drew a line with his finger about the level of his eyes. Churchill got up to speak. He glanced at the imaginary line on the wall. He looked up at the ceiling, and made a mathematical calculation with his fingers.

Then he sighed and said, "Ah, so much to be done, and so little time in which to do it."

I suspect that Nehemiah felt like that as he surveyed the ruins of Jerusalem, but he had God on his side and he led God's people with a firm faith. He spelled out the vision and showed them where their many gifts could be used. He got them to pull together, regardless of social or religious status. He inspired them to work in an orderly fashion on clearly defined jobs, in clearly defined places, in clearly defined teams alongside other clearly defined teams, under clearly defined supervision, all for one clearly defined purpose - the Glory of God.

I don't know about you, but when I consider the person of Nehemiah, the size of the task, the nature of the opposition and the varied nature of the people, I can only conclude that the success of this endeavour was a sovereign work of the Grace of God. That actually, it was God who did the building.

So as individual followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, and together as his body and bride, may the lessons and wisdom of Nehemiah 3

not be lost on us. May *God's Glory* be our sole aim, and may his Spirit inspire and empower us. And as together we seek here to build something beautiful for God, may it be the Lord who build the house.

Pastor David

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