

2025 TALK – 26.1.25 NEHEMIAH 1 & 2:1-10

BEGINNING IN PAIN & PRAYER

You all know who gets the award for ‘saint of the week’ don’t you? And anyone who wins the award of ‘saint of the week’ award, gets put into the draw for saint of the year award... (Maybe we should do this each week... Just a thought). But yes, the saint I’m talking about is the Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde, who preached at the prayer service, after the second inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the US. Who had heard of Mariann before this week? I certainly hadn’t. But her plea to the President for mercy went viral. Asking mercy for whom? Both mercy towards immigrants & towards people who are gay & transgender. People she said who were feeling ‘fearful’ now. She was interviewed afterwards by the NY Times, about her address. She said that she was simply reminding both the President - and the nation - that the people first in line to be victimised under the new Presidency, were actually ‘neighbours’. And we know what God says in the Bible about how we should treat our neighbours don’t we?...

I mention Marianne’s example to us, because of an obvious parallel between her & the hero of our Bible story today, Nehemiah. Like Mariann, Nehemiah stood before a very powerful figure, Artaxerxes, King of Babylon. Like her, he was afraid. Here was a man who held the power of life & death. He could also put paid to Nehemiah’s dearest hopes, with a single word, a single look. But Nehemiah had chosen to appear before the King for the first time no less, with a glum look on his face. And the King noticed & asked him to explain his ‘sadness of heart’. We are told, Nehemiah was ‘very much afraid’. But, nevertheless, Nehemiah still spoke up & made his request to the King.

Let’s zoom out for a moment. We’ve focussed in on this vital & brief conversation between this ‘nobody’ called Nehemiah & this ‘A-lister’ Artaxerxes, who was ruling over a vast empire at this time. Nehemiah was a ‘cup-bearer’ to the King. A minor servant, tasked with an important role of ensuring the King was served with the finest wine & not poisoned. But his duty didn’t often bring him before the King. He usually hovered in the kitchens, checking the King’s drink, before someone else took it to him. This one time he took the cup himself, to try to say a few words to this demi-god-like figure.

I wonder if anyone has been watching the latest series of 'Wolf Hall' recently? That really captures what it was like to be in a King's service. In this case those who were close to King Henry VIII. Most of the time, silence really was the best policy. Most of those around the King simply got on with their jobs & didn't say a single word. **But** if the King did invite you to speak, you had to be sure you had something worth hearing, to the point & also honouring the King.

Thankfully, Nehemiah didn't fluff his lines with Artaxerxes. But what brought him to this point of taking his life in his hands & seeking to speak to the King?

Seems to me, the best preparation for speaking to those in authority over us, is the humble discipline of prayer. Just before this vital interview with the King, Nehemiah had spent days speaking with none other than the one he calls the 'LORD God of heaven'. Someone he recognises as King over all the earth. This is where N's ideas are both first planted & where they take shape & bear fruit.

How come Nehemiah has the sheer effrontery to speak with the LORD of all?

There are three things which encourage Nehemiah to fast & pray & plead with his God. Inevitably three things!... My talk has been a bit free-wheeling so far, but we must now anchor this talk with a short three-point message.

1st – Nehemiah belongs to the people of God

2nd – Nehemiah recognises that he & his people have sinned against God

3rd – Nehemiah hears terrible news about the city of God

Nehemiah had been brought up amongst a people of prayer. A people who knew they were in covenant relationship with the 'LORD God of heaven'. So, Nehemiah himself was a man of prayer. Someone steeped in the word of God & the story of God's people. He prayed for his people, both those with him in exile in Babylon - and those in the land of his fathers, in the land of Israel. So, like many of us here, Nehemiah had 'a foot in both camps'. With a heart both for the place he was living & a heart for 'the land of his fathers', far away.

So, we know that Nehemiah prayed every day. But I'm pretty sure that this is the first time ever Nehemiah has prayed like this. He wept. He mourned. He fasted & he prayed before the LORD. I have to ask myself. When was the last time I prayed like this...? In anguish of heart, like our LORD Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane... ? When was the last time you prayed like this?

Any new work of God begins with pain & prayer. Nehemiah had been cut to the heart. He had come to an awful realisation. That the terrible state of the homeland of the people of God had one root cause: the sinfulness of the people of God... Nehemiah pulls no punches when he confesses these sins. He implicates all of Israel, including himself & his family in what he describes very bluntly as 'wickedness'. Without being specific, he acknowledges that God's people have not obeyed God's laws.

When Carey began its first Vision Day for our church & community last year, we realised that we had to be honest: that we were far from where we should be as a church of Christ. But we did not begin in tears; in sackcloth and ashes; in repentance, as Nehemiah does here. We were much more British and methodical about things... (OK, that's fair enough, up to a point)...

But, now that we have agreed the next steps for our mission & adopted our new Mission Action Plan, this gives us an opportunity to pause and to reflect on the journey of the last year. Before, like Nehemiah, we re-double our efforts & strain every sinew in the work of God, the work of re-building, there may be space for us to re-visit what it means to mourn. To mourn for the state of the church generally – and our world more widely. Ahead of Lent & through Lent.

Nehemiah was given a report that God's people were in great trouble & disgrace. The walls of Jerusalem were completely broken down. The gates of Jerusalem had been burned down. The city of God was no longer a safe place to live. Israel felt a lawless place. It was at the mercy of any marauding mob. There was no longer anything of any value kept in the Temple, because its security could not be guaranteed. Jerusalem & the land of Israel was bankrupt, very afraid & without hope... Is this an accurate picture of where many churches find themselves today? Of where many communities find themselves – at the mercy of knife crime, or another violent protest by (eg) far-right mobs? For all that we were able to rejoice in at Wednesday night's church meeting, any sense of peace or hope seems v fragile. Very much like the supposed 'peace' between Israelis & Palestinians at present.

What should we do about our brokenness? Our own fragility? 'The man of lawlessness' is now in charge. The one who incited violence at Capitol Hill, 4 years ago & was convicted of trying to steal the last election, is now back in the White House. And pardoning all those who stormed the Capitol...

Let's bring things closer to home. Last year, due to the controversy over the faith & sexuality consultation across the Baptist Union, the so-called 'Evangelical Baptists' tried to stage a 'coup' to overthrow the leadership of the Baptist Union. Let's call it like it was shall we? That's what they attempted to do, in the name of God. Thankfully, godly wisdom prevailed and they weren't able to do as they had hoped. If they had succeeded, it would have split our Baptist movement & probably split Carey into the bargain.

What I find interesting & salutary about all this, as I look at Nehemiah, is that there is a deep-seated ambiguity here. The book does indeed celebrate Nehemiah (& Ezra before him), for their passion to see God's honour restored. But both books of Ezra & Nehemiah (which previously were one book) ends with a big anti-climax. Not as you would expect them to. Neither book ends with great celebrations. Yes, the Temple has been re-built. Yes, the walls of the city have been re-built. This is partly thanks to the energy & courage of men like Ezra & Nehemiah. & thanks to the coming together of a large, determined group of God's people. There is much to give thanks for. But the final chapters of both books end with God's people still deeply divided. The zeal of Nehemiah for his project of re-building ends up alienating whole groups of people. In chapter 13 of this book, Nehemiah rants & raves at some of his fellow Israelites & drives them away. It might be argued that Nehemiah becomes obsessed with his own success & with preserving a good report about his own legacy. He wants to be known for his purity, compared to others. Which should instantly be ringing some alarm bells for us. What about the wickedness he earlier confessed being part of? What did Jesus have to say about people who celebrated their own goodness, while looking down on others ?

For all that we have been able to agree together this week, about how to move forward with our mission, there is still a sense that God has a much bigger vision for our church. For all churches. For our world. For all that, thank God, we have been able to agree, there is still much, much more that God wants to do. Within us. Amongst us. Beyond us... Amen ?

Carey's leadership might have been able to get Carey to agree to what our next 3-5 years of mission as a church might look like. But it is still far beyond us – yet - to get the church to agree about faith & sexuality, for example. Not something I am going to begin to address from this pulpit, until our leadership team have discussed this fully, later this year. Watch this space. Please watch & pray...

What matters is not my vision, or even our vision... What matters is what is **God's vision** - for our church, for our nation & for our planet? Nehemiah, like Donald Trump, became too obsessed with his own reputation & the greatness of his nation. But any new work of God begins (and ends) with pain & prayer. With us owning our poverty & our need for God's forgiveness... Amen ?
(Song captures where we are as God's people: 'We've only just begun'.)