

2025 TALK – 26.1.25 NEHEMIAH 2:11-20 (& CHAP 3)/ROMANS 12:1-8

JERUSALEM – ‘WE RE-BUILT THIS CITY...’

Right now, it's not Jerusalem that needs re-building is it? It's Gaza. And what a job that is going to be. So much of that tiny strip of land has been reduced to rubble. It looks completely un-inhabitable. And I guess that was the point. But, as the story of Nehemiah reminds us that what is completely broken down, can be rebuilt. Surprisingly quickly. But anyone looking at Gaza right now will see that re-building these homes, hospitals, schools & work-places is going to take years. A lot of money and a lot of good will. What's needed is the most humungous miracle! A miracle which could start with Hamas renouncing its declared policy of destroying Israel... Could this happen? It seems extremely unlikely. But a top Muslim scholar in Gaza has already spoken out against the October 7th attack on Israel by Hamas. He is calling the people of the Koran, to listen to God, instead of their instinct for revenge. Let's be praying for a change of heart among the people of Gaza & the wider Middle East, like there has already been in Syria. Let's be continuing to support the work of Christian Aid in the Holy Land. We heard last week how God has used CA to help 800,000 people there in this last year. Now that's a miracle!

Equally, could there be a change of heart & policy in the government of Israel? Seems equally unlikely. But, as 'Jews for Jesus' is telling us, many Jews around the world are coming to Jesus. And right now, Jesus is asking the Israeli government: 'Who is your neighbour? And: 'How will YOU be a good, merciful neighbour?'... Let's be praying for a miracle in the Middle East this year. It won't be the first miracle there, nor will it be the last...

Talking of miracles, I have been encouraged by what I have been reading online just this week. I was reading how the Millennial Generation are much more open to God than former generations. Less likely to be atheist, more likely to talk about spiritual matters. Still very confused about what they believe about God, but much more open...! I also read in the Baptist Times, something that Carey itself is seeing. Lots of people have been getting baptised in our Baptist churches in the last few months. Many more than usual. Praise the LORD! Let's keep praying. Seems to me that God is doing something new among us. People are coming to the end of themselves. Seeing that we need all the help we can get to fix our world. People are realising that, as well as the latest scientific

developments, perhaps we also need some ancient wisdom. More than anything, we need to hear the voice of Jesus, the King of love. Amen?

But, enough of the larger picture. Enough of what is happening today. Let's focus now on the story of Nehemiah from many centuries ago. What might this story have to teach us, here at Carey in 2025?...

Before Nehemiah issued his call to re-build the walls of Jerusalem, he took a good look around. He made sure to become familiar with the reality of this city's brokenness & disgrace. No surprise, as Jesus said, before you build a tower, you have to calculate what it's going to take. What materials are required. My son-in-law is a Quantity Surveyor (who is currently working to build a new prison near Cambridge) – he could tell us a lot more about this first, important stage of any building work.

This surveying work is what Carey did last year, for the first of our Vision Days, when we looked at where we were as a church. We considered what we needed to put in place. The foundations we needed to lay before we could move ahead into the mission God has in mind for his church. As our Mission Action Plan shows, some of these things have already been put in place: a new vision statement, with four agreed mission objectives; a new welcome team to help build friendships with new attenders at Carey; a new team to plan Sunday morning worship, including making more of special events in the Christian calendar, like Christmas, Easter & Harvest; a review of our church meetings, to try to encourage more people to get involved in seeking God & making decisions about our church's life & mission... So far, so good. But this is where the fun really begins. The work of mission really starts.

There are two key building blocks, which are outlined in our Mission Action Plan for the beginning of the re-building of our church this year. I believe these need to be put in place to ensure that our church is an outward-looking, gospel-focussed church. A church in the heart of Hemel, that has sharing the good news of Jesus at its very heart. These two new building blocks are:

- the launching of a Youth Group, so our young people can share with their friends the good news of Jesus.
- the launching of an Alpha course for our church, so there is a friendly way for both adults & young people to learn about the Christian faith.

Both of these new steps forward are about us, together, building a Way of Holiness. A walkway & a doorway for those outside the church to come in & be welcomed in the name of Jesus. To find new life in Jesus... Alleluia ?...

This is all beginning to sound remarkably straight-forward. But, you and I both know this is not going to be as straight-forward as we would like to think. What can we learn from Nehemiah & from the people of God in Nehemiah's day?

To me, there are many surprising aspects of this story, which we will try to unpack in a moment. But one thing which doesn't surprise me is that Nehemiah was not able to anticipate all that was going to be needed to build a new Jerusalem. Yes, he realised he was going to need two things before he could begin this good work. He needed protection. He had an armed guard through the Trans-Euphrates region, before he got to Jerusalem. And he needed materials. He asked the King for ready access to timber from the royal park, to re-build the gates. But beyond that, he had no way of being able to anticipate what else he was going to need & what other challenges he might face. These would unfold as he went on. And the final challenge he faced, which was a surprise to him & which he didn't find an answer for, was God's people inter-marrying with people from other backgrounds beyond Jerusalem. People who Nehemiah felt (v.20) 'had no share' in the city; no claim to be part of Jerusalem'... Sadly, Nehemiah had a closed mind to certain people. Even though he knew the 'gracious hand of God was on him', there were ways in which he was less than gracious, but he seems to have been blind to this.

No surprise. There's something here which speaks directly to the situation in the Holy Land today. And also to our situation, as the people of God, reaching out in the name of Jesus to our community. Where do we draw the line as to who is welcome here? Well, we know don't we?... Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet (and indeed the whole of Jesus' ministry) shows us that we are compelled to 'compel' **everyone** to come in... No matter who they are... We have good news to share that is for all people... ! No surprise there... Alleluia!

Other specific details from this story are telling here. I am not surprised Nehemiah didn't ask for access to a quarry, nor did he ask for man-power to help. Nehemiah was confident that most of the big stones from the wall, would not have gone far from where they were. He was also confident that those living in Jerusalem would provide the man-power (and indeed woman power)

for this good, rebuilding work. Indeed, men & women were clearly involved. One lesson for Carey today is this. Quite simple. That the materials & the people needed to carry out this 'good work' are right here. Others, like those stones from the walls, may have fallen out with the church, but they are not far from us. Not far from being included once again. All the materials we might need, God has already provided them, or will provide them in the near future... Do we believe this? And it wasn't just God's people from within Jerusalem who did their bit. **Mizpah** is mentioned of course - just one of the places in the Trans-Euphrates where people came from. Another sign that God's vision was much bigger & more inclusive than Nehemiah's vision.

It doesn't surprise me that for a long time, Nehemiah kept his plans to himself. He didn't tell anyone in Jerusalem what he was thinking for quite a while. He knew that any plans needed to be given time to take shape. He also knew that his plans required sharing with everyone at the right moment. Sharing his plans with just a few people would likely give time for all sorts of rumours, misunderstandings & mis-information to develop. So, when he did share his plans with the priests, the nobles, the officials & all the people, they all heard together what Nehemiah was thinking. Another case for trying to get as many people to take part in our church meetings as possible...!

But, to be honest, one thing that does surprise me here, is just how quickly everyone gets on board with this. Verse 17, Nehemiah says, 'Come let us rebuild'. Verse 18 he tells them – 'not only is God with me, but the King supports my plan'... At the end of the same verse, they all seem to say with one voice: 'Let us start re-building'. Verse 19: 'So they began this good work'... Wow! That's very quick. No objections. Quite a contrast to Moses & Aaron trying to persuade God's people about leaving Egypt. Here in Nehemiah's day there must have been more discussion & some planning meetings. How do we know this? Because in chapter 3 we see that everyone has a clear idea of which team they are part of and which bit of the wall they will repair.

Another thing I am not surprised about is that some people agreed to help readily, while others didn't want any part of it. So, the people of Tekoa repaired not only one stretch of wall, but two. Meanwhile, the nobles of Tekoa didn't lift a finger. Maybe they felt that such work was beneath them. Perhaps it was because as landowners who lived outside of Jerusalem, they wouldn't get a

share in the city. They were perhaps expecting too much for themselves. They couldn't see the bigger picture. This is part of our story at Carey...

Another thing is not a surprise. I am not surprised there was opposition. There are always people who fear change. People who already have too much on their plates to get involved. People who feel that things might be done better. This also is part of our story at Carey, in getting our MAP agreed & in motion...

Something else that's not a surprise from the story of Nehemiah. Just how many people get involved. People with all sorts of skills. People with all sorts of regular jobs. Specialist craftsmen like goldsmiths, for example. Makers of perfume. Some of the most unlikely people downed their usual work tools & took up other tools, in the name of God. This is something of our story at Carey. People are stepping forward to help out, in different ways. (Just recently, Kay has offered to co-ordinate our fundraising team of Mizpah & Riti. We have helpers at Toddlers, alongside Margaret who has helped for some time, Ruhama has been helping & others are stepping forward. There is a team helping Tamzin with launching our Youth Group... Thanks be to God !). And I believe we will see more people coming forward to help with Carey's mission to our community... To help with eg. launching Alpha... Do we believe this ...?

As I draw to a close, here's a critical lesson from the story of Nehemiah, that he himself needed to learn. If we are to be a people who witness to God's grace in Jesus, it's vital that we are first gracious to each other. For my part, I need to learn to continue to be gracious to those who *seem* to be opposed to what we are trying to do here. Often there are very good reasons for their misgivings... And together we need to be gracious to those who perhaps don't seem to be doing their bit, or pulling their weight. Again, there may be some very good reasons why people can't or don't want to get more involved.

One thing that does always surprise me about the story of Nehemiah is this. Unlike Moses & most of the prophets before him, this man shows no sign of asking 'Why me?'. 'Who am I to do this? I do not have what it takes...'. I have to say that I identify much more with the prophets on this score. I don't have what appears to be Nehemiah's supreme self-confidence. Which might be said to be his supreme weakness. I often spend days wondering whether I am up to the challenge that is before us. I think I may have shared this story with you before. But before I came to Carey, God led me to the story of David & Goliath.

Of how David cast aside the armour of Saul for the battle ahead. Saul's reaction was: 'Don't be ridiculous – you can't win this battle as you are!'. God said to me very clearly that it was indeed 'ridiculous' to think that I could lead Carey... I laughed out loud when I realised this was what God was telling me. Absolutely right. No way I could meet this challenge – in my own strength. But our God if promise was promising to be with me. So I was able to say: 'I can't, but with God's help, I can'... With God's help I can. With God, nothing is impossible.

So, let me finish with this simple observation. I am **not** surprised that God's people, led by a sometimes less than gracious Nehemiah, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days. I'm not surprised. Why so? Because there is no telling what can happen when God is involved. There is no telling what God's people can achieve. When God's people begin to see that God is at work through them. Who can tell what miracles we will see in 2025...? Jesus told his disciples: '**You** will do greater things than this'. Do we believe this...?

We should not be surprised that we agreed our Mission Action Plan last month. This was the culmination of the efforts of many, to make sure that Carey had the best 'launch pad' for our mission. I believe we have made a good start to this good work. And there may be plenty of other pleasant surprises that God has lined up for us in the coming weeks & months. We might be pleasantly surprised that CBA decide to give us a grant to support our Children's Youth & Families Work. It is also true, as it was with N, that there may well be some unpleasant, unforeseen surprises ahead. It may be, for example, that Carey does **not** get a Home Mission grant from the CBA this year. In which case, we will still need to trust God – for another, bigger miracle - 'With God nothing is impossible'... Do we believe this? As Paul reminds us, any work of God begins with the transforming of our minds... Amen? Thanks be to God for his Living Word, the word of Christ who fires us & sets our hearts ablaze...