

2025 ALL-AGE TALK, 9.2.25, NEHEMIAH 4:6-20

FALLING OUT & GETTING ON

We all know what a blessing it can be when we have good friendships. We all know too how agonising it can be to fall out with someone close to us. Or how difficult it can be to not get on with someone we hoped we might get close to.

All of us experience conflict with others throughout our lives, in different ways. We can probably identify 'argy-bargy' between ourselves & others from some of our earliest memories. Arguments with brothers or sisters. Or at playgroup or nursery perhaps, being possessive over certain toys. Sadly, we can probably point to events more recently. Memories, perhaps as recent as this week, when we have either 'fallen out' with someone - or come close to it. As Jesus put it, 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world'. Jesus shows us the best example of how to face being on the receiving end of some serious 'aggro', without ever retaliating in kind.

Now Nehemiah's story of conflict in Nehemiah chapter 4, is a bit different to the relational conflicts we might experience in our lives. This was on a much bigger scale, involving a cast of hundreds or thousands of people. Nehemiah was called to lead a massive project of re-building the walls of Jerusalem, no less. They faced a deep-seated & potentially deadly conflict. Nehemiah & those who joined the re-building work, faced a group of people who were implacably opposed to Jerusalem being re-built. People who felt a new Jerusalem would undermine their power & influence in that region. This speaks into the situation in what we might call the 'unholy / Holy Land' right now.

The conflict transformation training I have done in the past has taught me much. One thing it tells me is this important lesson. Faced with any conflict, it is vital first to understand what level of conflict we are facing. So, without some miracle, Nehemiah wasn't going to be able to quickly placate Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites. That's not to say, however, that there might not have been some way of turning this from a deadly conflict into some kind of shared agreement about the future of Jerusalem. But that would have taken a long time. And it was not what Nehemiah felt he was there for. He had one focus alone – to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And he was going to get on with this in double-quick time, no matter what opposition he faced.

Any conflict transformation takes time. But if you're in a hurry to do what you feel God has called you to do, then you have to be prepared to make some enemies. I couldn't help think of the well-known 'Serenity Prayer' associated with AA. The importance of knowing what we can change, knowing what we can't change & having the wisdom to know the difference.

The gospel of Jesus, the gospel of peace is God's ultimate healing response to all the relational fall-out we experience. And also to all the deadly conflicts that we see in our world. In other words, when there is still a possibility of building bridges & repairing broken down relationships, we are sometimes called, in the name of Jesus, to stand in the gap. The picture of the re-builders of Jerusalem, standing in the gaps here is a good one for us. We are not meant to stand by & hope something happens to heal the breach. No. We are called to pray & to post a guard over our hearts. We are called to do all we can. Like the re-builders of Nehemiah 4. We are called like the re-builders of Jerusalem to 'work with all our hearts' to restore our relationships to what they should be...Amen?

I rejoice in the fact that there is lots of goodwill in our congregation. Like Nehemiah chapter 4, here at Carey lots of people are working very hard to build this church, with all their hearts. I praise God for all that is being done. But as with Nehemiah 4, people can easily become exhausted by all this work involves. Lots of different messages flying around. Many reasons for people to feel fearful. Both reasonable fears & irrational fears.

So, one of the main lessons of our story today is this: we need to be alert. Yes, to what is going on in our own hearts, what is going on around us. But being in a constant state of alert is exhausting. There's not much talk of this here in Neh 4, but we all need time to rest & re-gather ourselves. This awareness simply must be built into any re-building work. Every day God offers us the opportunity to find true rest in Him. More than anything, like the people of Jerusalem, we must be alert to what God is saying to us. One of the key verses here is that the workers, in the midst of all they were doing, remembered the LORD. They remembered just how awesome God was & is.

At this week's deacons meeting we just began to discuss how we might launch Alpha for our church. But I won't anticipate our discussions about this at our March church meeting. Simply to say, we will be building a team to launch Alpha. Let's pray that we stand together for this work, with God's help.

Like the re-builders of Jerusalem, I believe God wants to equip each of us to face the challenges ahead. So, I will finish with this reading about the armour of God, which I know our young people have already been studying... (EPH 6)