

TALK, 2.3.25, NEHEMIAH 9:1-17 & 12:27-43 (LAST IN SERIES)

STAND UP & PRAISE THE LORD!

I wonder... Have you ever turned up for an event inappropriately dressed? Imagine going to a graduation without your gown & mortar board, for example. Or to a garden party with the King - & somehow turning up in a pair of ripped jeans... ! It shouldn't happen should it? It's unlikely to happen, if you are thinking right & you make sure to be prepared.

After re-instating the celebrations of the Feast of the Tabernacles, as laid out in the law of Moses, God's people in Neh. Chapter 9, turn up dressed as if for Ash Wednesday. They have been fasting. They have gone all out with the 'sackcloth & ashes' look. They have even scattered dust on their heads. You can imagine that they looked a pretty miserable crowd, all hunched up, sitting down with their faces to the ground. Expecting to hear of their great sins, it seems...

But it appears that the Levites have overlooked the details on the invitations to this special event. They seem to be working to a completely different script. Their first words are these: 'Stand up and praise the LORD!'. And so begins this amazing prayer which starts & finishes – not with the sinfulness of God's people - but with the gloriousness of God. It is true, that apart from the mention which Abram gets here, the behaviour of God's people is not good. Yes, the Levites describe their ancestors as 'arrogant & stiff-necked'. The very opposite of how God's people should be. But equally, those who led God's people in worship that day, did not major on the sin of the people. They spoke much more of the goodness of God. As Paul put it: 'Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds'...

It's impossible to miss just how many times the word 'You' crops up in this prayer. 'You' referring to God & what God has done. If I am not mistaken, the word 'You' occurs 20 times, in just 9 verses... You do the maths! Let me list these for you. Impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Levites were there to help the people remember all that God had done:

'You alone are the LORD'...

'You made the heavens & all their starry host, the earth & all that is in it'...

'You gave life to everything'...

'You are the LORD God who chose Abram'...

'You found Abram's heart faithful'...

'You made a covenant with Abram'...

'You have kept your promise, because you are righteous'...

'You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt'...

'You sent signs & wonders'...

'You made a name for yourself'...

'You divided the sea, so your people passed through'...

'You hurled the pursuers of your people into the sea'...

'You led your people by day & night'...

'You came down on Mount Sinai...'

'You spoke to your people from heaven'...

'You gave them laws that are just & right'...

'You made known to them your holy Sabbath'...

'You gave them bread from heaven'...

'You brought water from the rock'...

'You told them to go in and take possession of the land'...

Praise the LORD! Blessed be God's name indeed...! The story of God's people is the story of what God has done... Much more than what God's people have done, much of which is forgettable. God's people here, in the time of Moses, one of the most notable heroes of our faith, even go so far as to appoint a leader to take them all back into slavery... They are thinking about heading in completely the wrong direction. Which reminds me of what is happening on the world stage right now. Our leaders not listening to God. Too many being arrogant & blind. Ignoring the suffering of the people & the agonising labour pains of God's creation. It's down to us as God's people to show the right way... To point people back to God. Which is what is at the heart of the Alpha course. Let's pray that, by God's grace, we can launch Alpha later this year.

When we look back on just last year, for example, we might be tempted to focus on what we have already done, God's people here at Carey. Together, we have agreed a new vision statement, new mission statements. We have drawn up & agreed a Mission Action Plan & are close to applying for a grant for our Children's Youth & Families worker. Much to celebrate & be thankful for, just from the last 12 months or so. But God has done so much more, to make all this possible.

If you recall, some time ago, God led another church to give a generous gift to help us launch out again with our Children & Families work. A work which has continued over 2 years, and is continuing & growing today. And God led someone to give a generous gift, so that we could pay to replace our church boilers. Which has meant that we have been able to worship here in the sanctuary through this winter. And God has led many people to worship here at Carey over the last year or so. Including a refugee, by the name of Milad, who became a Christian in his home country of Iran. Milad was led here, where he was baptised & has been used by God to encourage other young people to be baptised. It's true - God's people here have been working hard for God's Kingdom. Together we are very grateful for all the many hours people have given & volunteered in the name of Jesus. We are grateful for the generous giving of God's people. We give thanks for all that has been achieved through hard work & through giving, just like God's people in the days of Nehemiah.

I want to ask us though: how much have we thanked God for all **He** has done among us in recent months? God has been at work, sometimes in 'ordinary', sometimes in extraordinary ways. God has gracefully & graciously been at work behind the scenes. Today we celebrated the miracle of healing God has done for Gill & David's son, Philip. Also, for Pat & Norman's grand-daughter Maya. As God's people under Nehemiah are reminded, God has done so much more.

One of the oft-mentioned short-comings of God's people is repeated here: 'they failed to remember the miracles God had performed among them'. Let this not be true of us. We should take our lead here, from the one who was described as a 'friend of God': Abram... His heart was towards God. Abram was faithful, not just in what he did, but in the attitude of his heart. Even though God did not perform any miracles with Abram, he listened to God's voice. Together, with his wife, he grew in faith. Abraham & Sarah followed God's lead.

Here at Carey, just as in the days of Nehemiah, let us remember God's faithfulness to His people through the centuries, across the world. More specifically too: God's faithfulness to us here in Hemel, through more recent years. God has been at work in so many more ways than we realise. Alleluia !

God's desire, more than anything, is to be at work in and through us here. As Jesus proclaimed wherever he went: 'The Kingdom of God is among you... The Kingdom of God is within you'. As followers of Jesus, we have been given the gift of God's Spirit. A gift which means that God is at work within us. In a way which is beyond the wildest dreams of the people of Nehemiah's day. A Spirit which enables us to hear the voice of God. A Spirit which transforms our hearts & minds to make us more like God's chosen One.

Just as with Abram & Nehemiah, God has made a covenant with us. A covenant of love which he does not forget. After recalling all that God's people have been through. Through many 'dangers, toils & snares', in the words of the 'Amazing Grace'. Through times when God's people seem to have arrived at a dead end. A place of despair, seemingly without any hope for the future. Concluding the story of God's people, this prayer finishes with these words: 'You are a 'forgiving God, gracious & compassionate, slow to anger & abounding in love'...

We might forget sometimes, but God will not forget us, ever. We might refuse to listen to God at times, but God promises to listen to us, despite our waywardness. Thanks be to God. The LORD who made heaven & earth has not deserted us. The LORD who sent his Son to this world, will not desert us.

The Levites & the people of God end by purifying themselves, dedicating themselves afresh to God. Notice that they dedicate themselves first, before they dedicate their work, the walls of Jerusalem. Our work is not possible without God's work through us. So, I have a question to ask before we finish. What is God wanting to do through you in the coming days? How is God asking you to dedicate yourself afresh? Likely this is in many different ways. As many different ways as there are people here, who want to do God's will. But perhaps one of those ways God might use you in the future, is through volunteering to help with our Alpha course. Some have already volunteered to be on the Alpha planning team. Perhaps God is encouraging you to join them...

I love the beginning and end of these two passages. God's people begin by standing to praise the LORD. They finish with two choirs, leading the praises of God's people, right around the walls of Jerusalem. And there's this comment: 'the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away'. May this be true of Carey also. Imagine the rejoicing when we see one person come to faith in Jesus this year, maybe through the Alpha course, maybe some other way...? Our God is forgiving & abounding in love... Alleluia! Thanks be to God !