

Nehemiah 1-2: First responses when challenges hit

When Babylon's soldiers marched out of Jerusalem in 586 BC, they left a desolate city behind them. Its magnificent temple, built by Solomon 400 years earlier, was reduced to heaps of fallen masonry and charred timber. The city's gates and all its important buildings were enveloped in flames, and its strong walls demolished to ensure that the impoverished citizens could not organise another revolt such as the one recently attempted by the hapless King Zedekiah that had led to their downfall. Only the poorest of Jerusalem's people were left behind, the rest led off as captives to distant Babylon.

As the despondent exiles tramped the thousand miles of desert highway to Babylon, a burning city was behind them, and an unknown future lay ahead. Worst of all was the knowledge that their present desolation, frequently forewarned by the courageous prophet Jeremiah, was nothing other than God punishing them for having gone their own way. For not obeying the commands, laws and decrees given to the people of Israel through Moses. And they had no-one to blame but themselves.

Fast forward 140 years and we find Nehemiah, an Israelite born in Persia a century after the ravages of Babylon's king, born in captivity but serving in the royal court as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Traditionally, if you know the musical Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat, the function of a cupbearer was to taste in advance the wine (either for quality or for poison), and then carry and serve it to his master. But in a case like that of Nehemiah, a cupbearer for royalty was not just a personal servant but also a trusted confidant and advisor. Thus, it was an office of great responsibility, power, and honour in the Persian Empire.

Despite having been born in Persia, Nehemiah would have learned of distant Jerusalem from stories handed down and related by fellow-Israelites. Although he has a highly responsible job, in a secure environment in a fine Persian city, noted for its opulence and prosperity, it appears that Nehemiah hasn't forgotten his roots. He knows that his contemporary, Ezra, has led a group of returning exiles to Jerusalem, so when travellers come from Judah, Nehemiah is anxious to find out how they are doing. We read he '*questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.*' And it isn't good news. The people are in great trouble and disgrace, the great wall surrounding the city is broken down and the gates are burned.

What is Nehemiah's first response on hearing this news? He sits down and weeps. This strong, confident and competent man, of high standing in the royal court has a tender heart. When he received the news that Jerusalem – the land of his ancestors – was in ruins, it grieved him deeply. Imagining the remnant of his people being persecuted and disgraced, scraping by in a city with no protective wall around it, he could not help himself; he wept and mourned. His first response to the challenging news was therefore an outpouring of emotion. He held nothing back. What an example for us as we face struggles and heartache in the world. We don't have to 'act strong' or 'be tough'. We can be real. Even Jesus, the Word become flesh from our gospel reading today, fully human as well as divine, wept when he heard that his friend Lazarus had died. God doesn't ask us to hide our emotions in times of pain and struggle. He invites us to express them to him and to others.

Along with tears and honest expression of emotion, Nehemiah's next response to the news is to pray. We read that, for several days, he fasted and prayed. Faced with the worst possible news, he turns instinctively to God, and we get a sense that, for Nehemiah, prayer was a vital daily experience.

Nothing mattered more than entering the Lord's presence to express his anguish about his people's needs, to confess his inadequacy, reflect on his personal response to the news from Jerusalem, and seek guidance about what might and must be done. How might our lives be different if our natural response was to pray when challenges come our way? Too often we find ourselves complaining or becoming discouraged. Sometimes we move into action, trying to solve the problem ourselves before talking with God. Often, we'll talk to a whole host of people – family, friends, colleagues, before praying about it. Maybe if there's something big in our lives at the moment that we're struggling with, we can use the example of Nehemiah's prayer and write our own prayer which begins: *'O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God ...'* and then tell God how it is.

Nehemiah's wasn't just a one-off prayer, but prayer that lasted some days. Day and night, we read, he poured out his soul. And in the prayer recorded in chapter one, encouraged by the past, Nehemiah faces the future. God has spoken clearly and unmistakably to his people and will not change his mind.

He warned them that if they were unfaithful and broke the covenant, they would be scattered, but he also promises to gather them together, if they return to him and obey him once more. To gather them from the farthest horizon. Nehemiah must have thought that he was at the farthest horizon in Susa, in Persia, but God was with him and his promise would never be broken.

Then, as a natural response to the huge challenge he faced, Nehemiah began to make a whole series of plans. His heart was broken over the shameful condition of his people and the city of Jerusalem; he was not about to sit by and do nothing. Nehemiah models something every follower of Jesus needs to copy. He was honest with his emotions and he prayed passionately. But he was also committed to move to action. Rather than just hope things would work out, Nehemiah thought through the implications and made a plan. He decided that *he* would be part of the solution.

Four months later, the right moment presents itself. On a day when everyone is celebrating – it's New Year – Nehemiah approaches the king with wine, looking anything but happy. And it's a look that doesn't escape the king's notice. '*Why does your face look so sad?*' he is asked.

And we're told that Nehemiah is then desperately afraid. In his fear, Nehemiah falls back on his natural response in dealing with acute challenge. He seeks God in prayer.

We read '*Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king.*' We're not told *what* he prayed, but we can guess that it was one of those arrow prayers, with the word HELP in capital letters. And, in his moment of need, he is given the grace to look up and speak out. '*I was very much afraid, but I said to the king...*' He trusted God, had been praying for months, and in that moment his courage came. He told the king that it was no longer possible for him to hide his grief, as the place where his ancestors were buried had become a desolate waste and fire had ravaged a holy city. The thought of desecrated burial places would touch a chord with the king, as the Persians revered their ancestors and graves were sacred places. A wise move on Nehemiah's part, and Artaxerxes asks him exactly what he wants.

Nehemiah's request to go to Jerusalem is granted and he is very clear about the reasons for his success: '*Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*' And the hand that had strengthened him in Susa was going to prove more supportive than ever when he arrived in Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

As the Church family of All Saints, we are also at a time of re-building. The church building is being re-ordered to provide a more flexible space and, as a church, we want to grow in faith as a confident people of God, and we want to reach others with the good news of Jesus. We want to build God's kingdom in Cottenham. But what we know about church attendance over the last decade is that the numbers coming on a Sunday are in slow decline, more so among the younger generations. Faced with these challenges, what can we learn from Nehemiah?

Firstly, we learn that we must be real and authentic with each other. We are family, and as family, we need to be honest with each other when challenges come. Challenges for us as individuals, and challenges together as church. When Nehemiah heard the news of his people in Jerusalem, it grieved him deeply and he wept. He knew that there had been times in Israel's history when things had been different, times when the people had been in step with God, and were following his ways. Yet, so much had changed. And, like Nehemiah, we can look to the past - not to wish ourselves back there - but to remember, like Nehemiah, God's promises. His promise to prosper us, to give us a hope and a future. And Jesus' promise to be with us always as we follow his command to make disciples of all nations.

Secondly, Nehemiah's response emphasises for us the necessity of prayer. What is obvious throughout the book of Nehemiah and particularly these first two chapters is how much Nehemiah is a man of prayer. Faced with news of his people, he prays. In working through what he wants to do, he prays. In front of the king who asks him what he wants, he prays. Over this next year, we have decisions and plans to make. Plans about the church building. Plans about how we grow in discipleship. Plans for how we grow the church through initiatives such as Messy Church. And we need to be praying. PCC looked at the story of the wise and foolish builders at its meeting this week and Psalm 127 with these words - *'Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.'* How can we become better at praying, at seeking God's will? As individuals and as a church.

Maybe you could take home a prayer card that has the starting words from Nehemiah's prayer - *'O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God ...'* and commit to pray about the challenges we face.

And thirdly, we need to be a people of action. Nehemiah was honest with his emotions and prayed passionately, but he was also committed to move to action. What is God calling you to in the rebuilding of this church? How can you be part of the solution? How can you help others to grow in faith? How can you reach others with the good news of Christ? Is there maybe an Action Group you could support, or can you commit to surround those meeting next week in prayer?

As I was finishing this sermon on Friday, I was greatly encouraged by the closing words of the lectionary Psalm 48 for that day which speaks of the great city of Jerusalem in all its glory:

Walk around Zion, go all around it,
consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God for ever and ever.
He will be our guide for ever.

And that is our challenge and our prayer. That with God as our guide, we tell
others that this is our God, for ever and ever.

Amen.