

Nehemiah 5 – Confronting Problems

An anecdote about Gandhi's integrity involves a mother who brought her young son to meet the great man. She asked Gandhi to tell the boy never to eat sugar because of the effects on his health and teeth. Gandhi refused, instead asking the mother to bring her son to see him again 30 days later. When she returned, Gandhi did as she wished, telling the boy to stay away from sugar as it was bad for him. The mother wondered why Gandhi had not just done that on the first visit. Gandhi replied that he had still been eating sugar at their first visit, and did not feel comfortable telling others to abstain from something that he still enjoyed. Gandhi was someone for whom aligning *'what we say'* with *'what we do'* was really important, and he wasn't prepared to tell the young boy to do something if he wasn't doing it himself.

And this is the essence of chapter 5 of Nehemiah. But let's look first at what was happening.

As you'll have heard from Joe's reading of the passage, the scene changes dramatically in this chapter, from building and defending Jerusalem's walls to Judah's

urgent economic needs. For quite some time now, the exhausted workers had been labouring under severe economic difficulties and, with increased pressure from stories from home, they could hold out no longer. We read, *'both the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews'* concerning some alarming acts of greed which had resulted in widespread poverty and injustice. So what was going on? Well, several things.

Firstly, in order to build the wall, you will recall that labourers had been recruited from a wide area. People had left their normal trades, crafts and professions, farms and smallholdings, for a period of two months, and without the main bread-winner at home, many large families were without food.

Secondly, this was happening at the end of a time of famine, and food supplies were scarce. Greedy merchants had used the opportunity to put up the price of grain, and some people had been forced to mortgage their fields, vineyards and homes just to put food on the table.

Thirdly, taxes on fields and vineyards payable to the Persian king had just gone up, to finance the building of magnificent palaces back in Susa, the capital of Persia; and a succession of battles had been very costly.

And fourthly, there was some very dubious money lending going on. Some of the people in Jerusalem were very rich, but many were poor. Sadly, those who were wealthy were loaning money at high interest to their poor neighbours and family members. As a result, many in the community had lost their fields, vineyards, homes and even their children, who had been sold into slavery. It seems almost unthinkable. Rather than use their position and resources to help those in need – *their own people*, the rich were using these advantages to oppress instead. The charging of interest on loans made to fellow-Israelites was strictly forbidden in God's law and was one of the offences that had led the Israelites into exile in the first place. But here they were in the next century doing the same thing again. Such blatant disregard for God's Word could not be overlooked and, on hearing what was going on, Nehemiah knew he must act.

So what does he do?

Well, he does three things.

Firstly, we read of his personal response to the problem. '*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry*', not *just* angry, but *very* angry and you imagine him red-hot with rage, but he refuses to act out of anger

but instead *pondered* the situation in his mind. He thinks things through before acting – a very wise move from which we could learn much today, in an age where it's very easy to quickly fire off a text or email when something has made us cross. I know I've been guilty of that – and I've also learnt that a response the following day is often a better and more helpful one, as well as learning to love your draft box. So, for Nehemiah, only *after* he's thought it through, does he confront the nobles and officials with the charges against them. He makes it clear that he *knows* what they're doing and that it *isn't* on!

Secondly, he calls a meeting, but this isn't a little private committee meeting of elders. No, he calls a large, public meeting to confront the issue. He's heard the complaints of the people, he's angry at the blatant disregard for God's law, and he brings the whole community together, so that the families who have lost everything can voice their complaints *directly* to those who have caused the problem. And by facing their accusers, the greedy moneylenders are forced to face up to what they have done. Nehemiah knows that the issue has to be confronted. After all, what good would it be to have a high, strong city wall and be protected from outside

attack, when those who were safe and secure inside the wall were abusing each other?

And thirdly, Nehemiah very eloquently presents a persuasive and well-rehearsed argument for putting things right.

He begins by appealing to their conscience. Prior to Nehemiah's return, people had been forced to sell themselves or their children as slaves to Gentile homes. Most had been generously bought back by their fellow-countrymen but were now forced to return to slavery again, but this time in Israelite homes. This was a scandal of mega proportion.

He then appeals to love. The fact that they all belonged to the same family of faith meant that those in trouble should be loved, not robbed.

He appeals to their moral sensitivity – *'What you are doing is not right. If you want to live as part of a community, you can't treat people like this.'*

Just in case they've not got it yet, he then appeals to theology and Scripture. *'Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God?'* he asks. As Israelite people, committed to a covenant relationship with God, don't they want to

reflect God's love, pursue his will and obey his Word? They *know* how they should live. They *know* the specific teaching in Leviticus about how to treat the poor - *not* lending money at interest or selling food at a profit. But they have chosen to ignore it.

He also appeals to testimony. *How* can they be witnesses to an unbelieving world, a light to all nations, when they behave so cruelly towards their own people? Who would ever believe that Israel's God was kind, merciful and compassionate when his worshippers were cruel, merciless and mean towards the people he loves?

He appeals to experience – his own, and tells the offenders that *he*, his brothers and colleagues are also loaning money to fellow-Israelites, *but here's the difference – they're* lending money totally without interest, and he is urging others to do the same. As a leader, he is asking others to do nothing that he himself isn't prepared to do. He sets the example, the standard for others to follow. A great example for leaders today.

And finally, he appeals to commitment. Nehemiah's demand that the situation be put right straightaway – *'Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are*

charging them – is met with a prompt response – ‘*We will give it back. We will do as you say.*’ But Nehemiah isn’t content to just take their word for it. He summons the priests and orders the wrongdoers to swear an oath that they will do what they have promised. To which, the whole assembly – everyone gathered – cried ‘*Amen!*’ Job done, problem resolved. The work of rebuilding the walls can continue.

Like Ghandi, Nehemiah was a man who sought to model the things he was teaching and calling the people to do. What he said was perfectly aligned with what he did. And, from this position of truth and integrity, he speaks out against the appalling situation he’s confronted with. Whereas the issues last week – the threat to momentum - had come from outside attacks and pressures, *this time*, the issues were from *within* the community itself. And, as a leader, Nehemiah is faced with a decision. Does he deal with the situation and risk bringing all sorts of turmoil to light? Or, should he look the other way, ignore the growing problems, and tolerate the disobedience of a number of key people in the community? For most of us, the courage to confront doesn’t come easily. We don’t like conflict. But the hard reality is that when we don’t deal with a situation that needs honest and loving

confrontation, the damage comes back in multiplied form. The elephant in the room doesn’t go away but simply takes up more space.

Nehemiah knew that if the people of Israel were ever to be strong again, they needed to be true to who they were – *chosen people of God*, chosen to be a light to other nations and to point people towards God. And they couldn’t do that if there was a huge gap between what they said and what they did.

And for us as Christians, the tension between what we profess each week as we pray and worship together, and how that then plays out during the week at home, at work or at school, is just as great as it was in Nehemiah’s day. And we will all have areas of our lives in which we need to better align ‘what we say’ with ‘what we do’. A challenge for each of us as we leave today, and particularly as part of our Lenton journey – a time of greater self-examination - is to consider *one* such area and think what *you* can do to make your ‘*do*’ look more like your ‘*say*’. Whatever it is will look different for each one of us but, if we’re honest, I’m sure we’ll all be able to think of something.

Maybe something else we can do is to identify those in our lives who have *inspired* us by their example of living out the faith with consistency and integrity. Those who have walked the walk, as well as talked the talk. And to *thank them*. Thank them by making a telephone call, or sending a card, or an email or text, to let them know how God has impacted your life through their example.

And finally, let's all commit to be people who *shine* with the light of Christ. Who take up their cross and follow him. To walk a path that Jesus, like Nehemiah, was prepared to walk before us. To live a different and better way. To live as those who are great do-ers as well as say-ers.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.