

Sorry, Please & Thank You (07.01.24)

We're beginning a new series from the book of Nehemiah. 1,000 years before this book the nation of Israel was led by God, with Moses out of Egypt, and after a period under judges, for the past 500 years they've had their Kings.

But in 720BC Samaria, the capital of then Northern Kingdom (Israel) was destroyed by the Assyrians, and the people exiled, scattered across the Assyrian empire. For another 140 years Judah, the Southern Kingdom, limped on, but in 596/7BC the temple and city were destroyed by the Babylonians and anything, people and treasures, which might make them a viable nation were removed.

In 538, nearly 50,000 of the Jewish exiles returned to Judah, as permitted by Cyrus, the king of the now Persian empire. They began rebuilding the temple, but this was a stop start process, as some of the now 'locals' objected.

[These locals were the people from a variety of nations who had been moved in, by the previous Assyrian and Babylonian programme of dismantling nations and cultures – these people syncretised the religion of Yahweh, with their own customs, and became known as the Samaritans.]

However, under the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, after 20 years, the temple was finally completed in 516BC.

But, 70 years later, the city was still essentially a ruin, without walls. There was travelling between Judah and Babylon, including Ezra, the person behind the book that partners Nehemiah. Ezra had travelled to Jerusalem in 458BC, again at an emperor's command, this time to teach the Law.

And 13 years later one of Nehemiah's brothers/kinsman, Hanani travelling from Judah brings the news that starts our book.

So what? Why should we read the Old Testament? Read 1 Corinthians 10:11.

This series is to inspire us to participate in the rebuilding of God's holy people, both the church and ourselves, as individuals.

Without walls, the city was vulnerable to physical attack from marauders plundering any wealth, and from the alternative ideas and practices pulling people away from following God. Nehemiah rebuilds the walls, which has both a practical benefit for security, and is symbolic of the unique and 'set-apart'/holy nature of God's called out people.

The 'walls' of the Western Church are very much broken down. Without the walls, many have drifted away. The boundaries have been pulled down, and we are less certain of God and his purposes. There is a growing mixture of Biblical and secular ideas leading to 'alternative' theologies and practices.

And, Individually, the walls of our own lives may similarly be disrepair, though there may be a commitment to Christ, as there was a tacit commitment to temple by the Jews, but there can be a struggle with mature discipleship. Any attempts to grow are quickly extinguished, as there is little foundation and protection (i.e. the walls).

So, what do we hear and learn today – and what will we do about it?

Nehemiah was cup bearer to the King. A very trusted and important position. He had the ear of, and kept the confidence of, the King, but he was not a builder! Yet, Nehemiah was available and became able.

Nehemiah cared. Jesus said, 'blessed are those who mourn' (Matthew 5:4), those who care about the gap, between what is and what should be.

Do we care about the brokenness of our world, and about the poverty of the church, including our church? There are over 6,000 people living in Four Marks and Medstead – but only just over 2% are likely in church today! We are struggling to fill volunteer roles, in pastoral care, in children's work, and so on... Our struggle to fill our youth and children's minister role is because there are less young Christians are coming through the ranks.

The Western church is struggling with staying faithful to the Gospel of Jesus. What are we starting to believe and practice in Christianity about the revelation of Jesus in the Bible, as the Word of God? For some in the church, what was once the Anglican foundational order of understanding God and his will, Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, has been turned on its head with Reason trumping all as the starting point. This has led to interpreting God in the light of

culture and our reasoning, and not through His supernatural revelation of himself in Jesus. And this can lead us to step away from God's design for our best in relationship with him and others, impacting our approaches to politics, creation, ethics, and morality, etc.

Instead of *sola scriptura*, the cry of the reformation, or '*I think therefore I am*', from Descartes, it becomes, 'I feel therefore I do.'

Nehemiah, cared about the 'gap' between what was and what should be.

Nehemiah was also humble. He knew the failure included him. It was not his problem, it doesn't involve him, or does it? Nehemiah associated himself with the sin of his people – their sin is his sin, and requires repentance. Read again 1:4-7 and see also Daniel 9:1-19.

And Nehemiah acts. He prays and this prayer went on for four months, and then he speaks to the king. A life risking action.

At the beginning of this New Year, what is God calling you to do – are you listening?