



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Rebuilding Jerusalem - Nehemiah

Readings: Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10, Ps 18, 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

I want to have a little look at the Book of Nehemiah.

A little background here.....

Nehemiah lived in the 5th century before Christ. He was the cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes, ruler of the great Persian Empire established by Cyrus the Great. Cyrus had established widespread religious toleration and allowed the captive exile Jewish community to return to their land. Here we meet the situation, a biblical lifetime after Cyrus conquest of Babylon and the freeing of the Jews.

The news from Israel is not good. The little Jewish community scratches out a living, surrounded by hostile tribes, and Jerusalem remains a ruin. It is this that knowledge that exercises Nehemiah and causes such distress that his Master, the King, notices. He grants Nehemiah time to return and rebuild Jerusalem and that is what this brief but important book is about.

Your initial response may be to assume that this is the territory of those for whom a Screwfix catalogue is the most interesting literature.

Stay tuned.....this is more than a building project. It is a blueprint for revival, renewal, rebuilding and repopulating the Holy City of God's Church and reinvigorating the spiritual life of the People of God. Why do we need to read it still? After all, our capital city is not a ruin nor temples pulled down.

Well, the parallels are still too great to ignore. We live in an age where almost everything which has comprised our civilisation is under attack and the institution of the Church has failed to stem the ebbing tide of belief among our people. We live, dare I say it, amidst the ruins of Christendom and in a culture of scarcely concealed hostility

It is wise then to look, in this little volume for clues as to how we might rebuild and renew in our time.

First of all it is noticeable that God chooses an outsider to do this work. It is not that the Church of God is lacking in people of good intent but rather that it is very hard for those who have spent their lives in the institution to see how to reform it and make it fit for purpose again. In choosing Nehemiah, God signals a new approach. The initiative and leadership will come from a man who is, in many respects, a faithful stranger, not part of the current hierarchy. This is significant because the current hierarchy has become too close to the problem to see how to solve it. They are too busy 'keeping the show on the road' to have any real appetite for radical solutions. The connected and concerned outsider, in this case, has a much clearer view of what is wrong and what needs doing.

The First thing we are told about Nehemiah's response to the news of the state of his native state, is that **he 'sank down in prayer and wept. He mourned and fasted and prayed'. He made confession on his own behalf and on behalf of his people. Nehemiah has a heart for renewal, revival and reconciliation and rebuilding the kingdom. Without these, nothing can happen.** If we are simply in the business of 'the management of decline', then nothing will happen to reverse it. A vision is required. If we are not distressed and troubled by the state of the Church and Nation and are not prepared to fast and pray, as Nehemiah did, then nothing will happen. If we are content to decline, then decline we will continue to do. If we have no driving sorrow for the state of church and nation, no penitence for our sins, then we will continue to live among the ruins of Christendom surrounded by increasingly belligerent enemies, seeking our demise.

Nehemiah goes - with the consent of the State and with its guarantee of security. The State is permissive rather than constructive but that is enough. On arrival **he spends three days acclimatising himself and getting to**

know the local picture. Not least of which is the hostility of the surrounding enemies of the little Jewish state. At this stage he has not told anyone why he has come. At the end of that time, **he undertakes a night- time detailed inspection of the ruined walls and gates.** **Having done this and effected a plan, Nehemiah exhorts the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem..** Chapter three gives an extensive list of the composition of the work parties and their specific tasks. This is not a piecemeal operation but a co-ordinated execution of a master plan in which all take part. So far then:- **penitence, prayer, fasting, an assessment, a survey, a plan and a call to the sacred task.**

Initially their work is greeted by derision from the enemy. 'A jackal could jump over your walls', sneers one. Another accuses them of 'planning sedition and rebellion from the Empire'. **We must be prepared for discouragement and contempt.** But, we are told, the work continues at a pace because, **'The people put their hearts into the work.'** **Nothing less will do.**

The realisation that the work is no longer a joke and is now unstoppable, the enemies plan violence.

This slows down the work because Nehemiah has to order **half the work force to build while half stand guard, fully armed. The order is given that wherever there is an attack, the rest will come to that place and rally round the defenders. One for all and all for one.** Even the working shift always had their weapons to hand. Absolute solidarity and tireless commitment are required.

When the work is completed the next task is the repopulation of Jerusalem, calling the exiles home. **The mission to the missing is paramount.**

Finally the assembly of the city stands while the **whole of the Law is read to them and the Covenant is renewed in their promise.**

They are to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles – that long forgotten remembrance when they are to live outdoors under a temporary shelters to remind themselves of their nomadic past before God gave them this city to dwell in. And then to celebrate the Feast of the Atonement.

We are never to forget where we have come from nor where, by God's grace and the supreme atonement in Christ, we are heading.

Thus and thus alone will the City of God be rebuilt.