

Bennochy church: 31st January 2016

In history people rise from obscurity to positions of power. It happens all the time. Greatness not coming through noble birth but sometimes it is just the hand that life has dealt you and whether or not the opportunity is grasped. Nehemiah was a man of position, cup bearer to the King of Persia. The greatest empire of its day. But in reality he was part of a slave nation, the people of Judah, the southern kingdom of the ancient nation of Israel, exiled decades earlier to Babylon. It is in this position of great weakness that he places a request before king Artaxerxes the 1st, and in spite of the fact that it could have cost him his life, he ends up as governor of the Persian province of Judah. He even gets a military escort, as he and other Babylonian Jews make the long journey, from Susa in Persia, to Jerusalem.

But he is a governor with very little power. But he knows one thing, if Jerusalem is to be protected, then the city walls must be rebuilt and the gates repaired. It is bad enough that the city is a building site, but the local opposition quickly make themselves known.

One of the big issues for Nehemiah is that the world has moved on during his people's time in exile. By the time Nehemiah gets to Jerusalem it is 445 BC, that is about 150 years since the people of Judah were deported to Babylon. He lands there in the midst of a different political world. His arrival, as governor,

arouses suspicion and animosity from some of the leading people round about. That should not surprise us. There were a lot of competing interests. Trade routes to protect and positions of power and influence to maintain.

Let me introduce you to the protagonists. Sanballat is governor of Samaria, that lies just to the North of Jerusalem. The Samaritans, hated by the Jews at the time of Jesus, who believed they were the true preservers of the faith of ancient Israel. Israel was a land divided in history and Sanballat was not going to allow these returning Jews to become political rivals, and he knew why Nehemiah's first task was to rebuild the city walls.

Then there was Tobiah, who was possibly governor of Ammon, just to the East of Judah and Geshem who was possibly chief of the Arab tribes to the south. This political alliance surrounded the province of Judah and unless the walls were rebuilt and the gates repaired, Jerusalem was in a very vulnerable position.

I suspect that Nehemiah recognised his position of vulnerability, in the midst of these aggressive neighbours, he also wondered, who could he really trust. Would the people of Jerusalem and Judah support him?

His first task seems to have been to do nothing and to keep silent. It is only after three days, that he takes some trusted friends with him on a tour of the walls and he does it in the

middle of the night. It is a scene of total destruction. The invading armies had done their job and added to the decay of time, there were sections that even his donkey could not cross, and Nehemiah had to get off and walk. Picture the scene as Nehemiah, governor of Judah, first saw his city.

What is interesting is Nehemiah's perspective of his situation. His close up view, as he struggles across the rubble, and then his 'wide angled lens' view, as he looks towards the walls of Jerusalem from the Kidron valley outside the city. Sometimes you can be too close to a situation to make the right decision. He steps back a bit and then reveals to the people his story and his purpose. For any people or congregation, its *story* and its *purpose* needs to be understood. Story and purpose come before action. To those who were going to be involved in the work, he shares his story of God and the purpose of the action is made clear.

We are told the work begins immediately and interestingly, so does the opposition. They need to undermine what Nehemiah is up to. So they resort to ridicule and threat. *Hey guys, they think they can rebuild the wall! Just wait till we tell the king what is going on here, the setting up of a rival power base.* Tactics used throughout history.

Nehemiah's response is both powerful and cuts to the bone. *We are the servants of God. We are going to rebuild these walls and*

we will succeed. And you what, you will not be part of God's continuing story.

I wonder what tasks are we being asked to do by God, in the midst of our rubble, ridicule and threat?

I remember someone once saying, faith begins by clearing the rubble, even when it might seem pointless. It is where we begin to bring order out of chaos. It is about discerning the purposes of God and then rolling our sleeves up and getting involved! No one else was going to repair the wall! In spite of all the challenges that are all around us, we need to hold fast to the story and purposes of God. In God, is our hope.

The clear difference between ourselves and Nehemiah is this; we build, not to defend or to protect, but to show the world that we are part of God's continuing story. God is not finished with his church, but asks only that we see it with different eyes. Not as a wall to be built, but as a people with a Kingdom to share. Amen.