

Sunday 8th May 2022
Nehemiah 2:10-3:5
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and renew our minds.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Last week I was getting Hope ready for school about half seven or so in the morning, she asked me the question 'Dad, can I wear nail polish to school today?' and I just feel the nerves rise up within me. The worry about what to do in this moment and not because applying nail polish phases me any longer. Two years of a pandemic and especially at the start when you're trying to figure out how to pass time with a three-year-old, nail polish is a key winner because 'Well Hope, you need to sit for five or ten minutes to let it dry' so you know 'just wait a wee bit longer.' So, I'm quite adept at applying the old nail polish to Hope's nails now. No, no the worry was not about applying the nail polish but whether we should because there's part of me that begins to worry, here's a five-year-old and is she worried about what people think about her and that her friends are wearing nail polish so she wants to nail polish, and if I say no then what's that going to do for her self-esteem. And I got in a bit of a tiz and in the end she wasn't allowed to wear nail polish and apparently, according to her mum, I made the right choice. So, score!

But I hope it's not the only one of us who finds moments where we're under the influence of people around us and our culture around us, we all are, whether it's the culture or the media, whether it's friends or family, whether it's maybe practices in the workplace. There are things that influence us. Influence what we should pursue or invest ourselves in, or chase after. But, more often than not, the things that we're told to pursue just raise anxiety and worry, they create competition and pride or even envy and bitterness, they're not life-giving. So, what are we investing ourselves in? What do we esteem or chase after?

We're now into week three of Nehemiah and we chose this book because of its focus on rebuilding. And we're aware that we're moving into a different phase with the pandemic and we're also aware hopefully, sadly, that our denomination is in exponential decline and actually that affects a lot of the denominations. So this week's focus on rebuilding helps us to think about how we might rebuild our own faith, but how might we might rebuild the community of faith as well. And we've seen in Nehemiah's story the importance of prayer and repentance and it was great to gather with folks this morning at quarter past ten, if you didn't make it along you missed out, because I just left me so encouraged from that time and I'd encourage you to think about maybe joining over the next four Sundays. We're going to pray each Sunday from 10:15 to 10:30 up to Pentecost Sunday on the 5th of June. You don't need to come and pray out loud, you can just listen in, but if that's not possible for you then there are many other ways to be praying whether it's at home or in a fellowship group or in a team that you're maybe part of. Get involved and be praying for our congregation and wider denomination. But this

week we move on once more and see the next bit of Nehemiah's story, of what it says to our situation.

In our passage we saw how Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. He traveled for four months from Souza to Jerusalem and, understandably, when he arrives, he needs a bit of a rest so, for three days, he rests. He prepares and then he goes and scouts out the city to see what needs doing. But he keeps all of his plans close to his chest probably because of the opposition he knows is out there against God's people, and that'll become more of a focus maybe in the next few weeks, but the time comes, eventually, for Nehemiah to make a move, to gather the people and share with them what is upon his heart. And so, he says to them 'You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace.' We will no longer be in disgrace - it's a theme that was there in chapter one but we didn't dwell on it much due to time constraints, but this theme of disgrace is important for Nehemiah and for God's people and it should be important for us too because it's not so much that the people are in disgrace, it's more about the worry about what that then causes for God's glory and name, because a diminished Jerusalem with its walls and gates and a mess portrays a diminished God to the people around them. And so, the neighboring peoples would think 'Well, your God can't be very powerful, look how we beat you up and tore down your walls. Your God can't care for you very much because you're not able to rebuild.' And so, they're in disgrace and because they're in disgrace the name of God is in disgrace. And so, as I've got on screen here the rebuilding is not about the builder, the rebuilding is not about the building, it's about the reputation of God, it's about God being seen to be worthy of worship, that he is the true God, their focus, a spiritual focus enabled, fulfilled through material means but with a spiritual focus, and it carries on into chapter three.

Chapter three we read at the very start that 'The high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the sheep gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place.' Now the order of things in scripture is very important at times and so the fact that Nehemiah begins with the sheep gate is important. At first, it seems like well, that's just another gate but actually, the Sheep Gate is where the sacrifices were brought in and so they're saying that's that was the gate they began with, that was the important gate because God is important, we're putting God first. And they dedicated it, they gave it over to God, they made it holy and all this because the rebuilding was not about the building, it was about God's name and glory, about the true worship of God.

So, what about us and every day, as we think about rebuilding things after the pandemic, as we think about rebuilding our denomination in light of its decline? What is the focus for us? Is it about just keeping the building open and keeping the lights on? Is it about getting back to the glory days? If you lived in the height of the church and just wanting that memory to become reality again? Is it about the reputation of the denomination? Is it about feeling successful here that 'Well hey, we've got kids?' What is it about for you? What is it about? I feel church wouldn't be a wrong thing to aspire for or a wrong thing to pray for, there might be very good reasons for that and based on

Nehemiah chapter 2 one good reason would be that a full church might show that there's a greater proportion of our community to recognize that God is worthy of praise. That would be a good reason. To see a full church, that would be a good reason to pray, for more people, and for worship not to make us feel good, not to massage our ego, but that God might be glorified and given His due worship. But for that to happen it needs to start in each of our lives. This needs to start in your life and in my life. We need to know that God is worthy of praise in all the seasons of life. We need to know that God is worthy of praise. So, let me ask, has your passion for God diminished of late? Is God less worthy, in your eyes now, of your praise? And I don't mean happy clappy, be like Scott, hands in the air kind of praise, okay, and passion, you can express your passion however you want to, but is it diminished from what it was? Is God less worthy now in your eyes?

When I was in my mid to late 20s I was in a youth worker job and it came to a very sudden end and it was a very painful experience and left a lot of wounds for me and a job did open up straight away. That was a very a fitting job and actually would bring a lot of benefit in the end but for that first year of my job, that new job, I did not like it. I was in a fellowship group and every two weeks I'd go along and I would just moan about my job. I did not want this job and in that first year what ended up changing was my perspective and part of what changed was recognizing that God was worthy whatever the season of my life, that God was worthy of my praise whatever the season of my life. Now that might not be exuberant happy praise but He is so worthy of my worship and praise whatever the season. Have you come to that point yet? Have you matured in your faith that you've learned that lesson? Often it can only be learned the hard way I'm afraid, but if we don't learn it then in our estimation and our perspective of God, God's worth ends up going like this and our faith ends up going like this. We need to learn the lesson if we want to mature in our faith, that God is worthy of praise whatever the season.

And so, rebuilding is not about the building, it's about God's worth, about His glory, about His reputation. And that's the first thing to learn from our passage today. Now let Nehemiah lays this concern before the people and he calls the people then to get involved and they respond with 'Let us start rebuilding.' and they begin the good work. And then, into chapter three, if you go and read it in detail, you can read list after list after the list of wall and gate and who gets involved, in what bit of work, and I saved you the pain of reading through all of chapter three but you probably - well done to Ian, by the way, for all the names, you did well this morning brother - but if you go into chapter three and you read it in detail you'll find that not once is Nehemiah mentioned. I'm sure he was involved in some way but he's not mentioned, and if you look in detail, the people that get involved come from eight different places. They don't all come from Jerusalem. Some of them come from places as far away as 15 or 20 miles. So, again, they weren't getting involved because it benefited them, they got involved because the rebuilding was not about the building. And they come from all different walks of life. They are male and female. They are high and low in society. They are different professions, so it's not just builders and masons and carpenters that get involved, there's perfumers and everything in there. Basically, all walks of life. It didn't matter

because there was this passion for the glory of God and so they got involved. And it all goes to show that rebuilding is a whole community effort, everyone needs to be involved to make it happen and everyone's got a part to play. And, of course, that echoes the New Testament where Paul talks about the church as a body and he says 'Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all of its many parts forms one body, so it is with Christ. Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.'

Now, the image of the body, the church as a body, conveys many things of our need for one another, of our care for one another, of our value of one another, however, in the context of the passage, it comes straight after a passage about our spiritual gifts, about the things God has given us to use for the common good, and so, we need to remember that part of the lesson from the image of a body is that we have a part to play and that, when we don't play our part, the body is weakened.

So, let me ask you, where are you serving? Where are you serving within this community of faith? Where are you using your time and your talents to build up the church, to care and to further our purposes within the community, that God might be glorified? A stronger church and a witnessing church that sees people come to faith that glorifies God?

This past week I have the huge privilege of being at a great many meetings, admittedly, but it's actually a real privilege at times because, for example, on Monday night I was at the Safeguarding Panel meeting which on the surface sounds really boring and tedious and who would want to be on the Safeguarding Panel, although they're lovely people, so don't tell that personally. Now the reason it was so encouraging is because well, I know many other Kirk Sessions don't have Safeguarding Panel meetings because they don't have children that they're working with and so they have no need to meet, but we do because we've got children amongst us that we're reaching out to and so it was great to see some names coming forward. But we also have a Pastoral Care system that many other churches would be envious of and, of course, it's not perfect and we can always improve things, but we have pastoral visitors that keep in touch with people who are housebound and maybe more vulnerable and needing a bit of support and it was great to hear of names on Monday night coming forward to be involved in that as well. That is a great thing. I've had emails coming in this week talking about starting the teas and coffees next Sunday so please come along for that because it's not just a nice thing, it's a great thing that we have an opportunity to be family because when you're in your pew how many people do you talk to, just a few that are around you and we get up and we go home and who knows if we see each other the rest of the week but we have that moment after the service to have a talk, have a catch up and to know what we can be praying for one another. So, come along to tea and coffee, give it a shot, especially if maybe you didn't do it before the pandemic either. And then I know I didn't manage to make it yesterday because I needed to save some time for the family, but yesterday morning the Up-and-Coming team met for a strategy breakfast - I'm always up for a breakfast - but I'm also up for an Up-and-Coming strategy session and it was great that they're thinking about how can we invest in our children and young people and particularly they were thinking about intergenerational things and they were thinking

about the zero to tens. And there's people who have had a busy week of work, they're here in church by the way, or serving through in those halls, and still they gave up a Saturday morning. Incredible people, a privilege to serve with them.

So, what about you? Where are you serving? You know, I need someone to come forward and lead the Communications Team, I need someone to come forward and lead the Discipleship Team, I need someone to oversee the publication of Bright Lights because this is all on me right now, I'm already busy enough. So, there are three jobs but there's many more. Now, you might be at an aging stage of life where mobility, strength, energy etc is a dynamic, and that comes, but I bet you can pray, I bet you know how to move, work your telephone. I'll give you a list of people I pray for or a list of people you can call. Every one of us has a job we can do. Every one of us. And if you can't name a job that you are doing, it's time to step up, and on your pews today there are these old cards that we have not had out since the start of the pandemic and on the back there's a list of areas and you could fill this out today and leave it with the door duty team at the front or back and say 'Well, I don't know exactly what to do but I'm willing so here's my details. Here's what I'm willing to help with.' Please, please get involved because there are some people who are carrying too much. Because, if we want to rebuild, well every one of us has to be involved, it's a whole community effort.

But we know from Nehemiah's time that there were people who didn't get involved both within the community and outwith the community and that brought challenges, it brought setbacks and disappointments I'm sure, but it was also costly and it goes to show that rebuilding is costly.

The first instance I want to flag up for us is with the nobles of Tekoa who 'would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.' Now, when we read that, we think 'Oh, here's a bunch of snobs who just can't be bothered. They just want to put up their feet and kick back.' and that's how it reads at first but, what we need to understand, is that the Hebrew for shoulders here refers to the back of the neck and it carries with it the imagery where an oxen would refuse to yield to the yoke that was placed across it to enable it to do its job and so, what's actually happening here is not that the nobles are lazy but the nobles are prideful and they will not yield to the leadership of Nehemiah and the group of people around him, they are refusing to yield to leadership and so the rebuilding comes with a cost. Sometimes we need to give up our pride and sometimes we need to re-engage. And I wonder if that's an issue for you. I don't think it'll be an issue for a lot of us but it might be an issue for some of us, because maybe you've chosen to disengage from church because of leadership, it could be my leadership, it could be the leadership of the elders or a leadership of someone within one of the teams, and because of something, you've decided to kind of reject them and step back and disengage. And maybe you've done it because you've genuinely felt hurt, I can understand that, but can I help you follow the logic of your choice through. First Corinthians says you are gifted to benefit the community and bring glory to God then, by you choosing to disengage, you are robbing God of glory and robbing this community of benefit and that's challenging, and so I'd encourage you to think about getting re-involved, not to massage my ego or make me feel better, not to say that what has been

done is okay but so as to say that God is worth it, God is worth it, that you'll get involved again and you'll serve and you'll use your gifts and it will be costly I'm sure. I've had to do it in my life. Maybe it's time for you to do it in your life. But there was also another cost for some people and more broadly for the people. Earlier on, in Nehemiah 2, we read that Samballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard about the rebuilding work and they began to mock and ridicule the people saying, what is it you're doing, because it just seemed crazy to them. Here's a bunch of people, there is a mess, there is no way that this is going to happen. It just seemed foolish and so they mocked and ridiculed the people. Imagine what the people would have been feeling. I'm sure they must have felt a degree of embarrassment, we all do, and if they'd allowed that embarrassment to take hold the work would have stopped. There was a cost to their rebuilding. They had to sacrifice their embarrassment. And I wonder if that's an issue for any of us? Maybe we're not willing to own up to being a Christian or that we go to church. Maybe we feel too embarrassed to share our faith or even to say to someone 'I'll pray about that for you.' It's a bit of a bold step and it can feel embarrassing but if you never say it, that person is never going to know that there's a God they could turn to. Or maybe it's embarrassment of getting involved in church, you might think 'Well, I can never do that, I'm not able to do that.' But there can be a false modesty, brothers and sisters, that holds us back because God is able to work through you, you just have to be willing to step out in faith. So, where might you need to sacrifice your embarrassment for God's glory?

Now, what helped Nehemiah and the people overcome and pay these costs? Well, it might not seem obvious at first, but hopefully you can follow my logic, because in response to the critics, Nehemiah said 'The God of heaven will give us success. We, as servants, will start rebuilding but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.' And that's a true statement. These opponents did not share in the kingdom of God because they didn't have faith in God. That's true, but the converse is also true, Nehemiah and the Israelites did share in the kingdom of God because they had faith in God and because they shared in that kingdom they were willing to sacrifice for that kingdom. They were seeing that that is where they were called to invest despite the cost, despite the embarrassment, they were willing to invest in that. And it makes me think of what Jesus said he said 'Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy. And why do you worry about clothes' (or Hope, why do you worry about nail polish, I can understand why she does, we'll get on to those other lessons) 'see how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness through faith in Jesus.' We share in the kingdom of God and we're called to invest in that kingdom to give it our focus to give our attention and time and talents and money and through all to then invest in what is eternal, what carries eternal worth, rather than what is fleeting. And so, I wonder can we be that people? Can we be a people where everyone, everyone is investing in the eternal,, the eternal kingdom of God? And when we do that, we show that God is worthy of our praise and when we do that, we show that everyone has to be involved and that we're willing to pay the cost. That's my prayer for us this morning as we think about these chapters of Nehemiah. So let us take a moment to pray. Let us pray.

Father, You will have been speaking to us in some way, maybe through the sermon, maybe through a prayer or a hymn or part of the reading that's been unexplored. Lord, whatever it may be, take it deep and bring forth a fruit a harvest from that seed that would be to Your glory. Lord, if there's been something that's challenging, give us grace to receive it and to respond. Lord, if we've needed a word of comfort may we know Your presence with us to uphold us and strengthen us in this season. May we know that you are a worthy, God, of our praise and love, and may we keep following You in the highs and in the lows. Oh Lord, lead us forward as a congregation and blow away the chaff from our time together and from the sermon, and just take deep what is of You, the furtherance of Your purposes in Your kingdom, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.