**People of Courage: Nehemiah (Stowe 16 April)**

Nehemiah! It might seem strange to us to be diving into the depths of the Old Testament when our minds are full of the radical and revolutionary events surrounding Jesus’s death and resurrection. But while Jesus is the supreme example of bravery for us, there are men and women of courage throughout the Bible.

Nehemiah lived during the time of exile, when the Jewish people were in Babylon after their forced removal from Judah. After more than half a century of dramatic political events, the Babylonian Empire lay in the hands of the Persians.

The story of Nehemiah begins when he is in the city of Susa and receives news of the small number of Jewish people who had returned to Jerusalem. Nehemiah chapter 1 describes the physical damage to the city and the difficult lives of its residents. At the same time, the reader is reminded that the Jewish people had denied God and sinned against him. Yet there is also a promise that if they commit to follow God and his covenant, he will bless and protect them.

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the King, responsible for bringing wine to him and making sure it was safe to drink. Although this might seem a simple role, the ancient world was full of intrigue, political machinations, and murder, and the one who looked after the king’s wine had to be completely trustworthy. Many cup bearers developed close relationships with their masters and acted as confidants for them, exercising considerable influence.

King Artaxerxes ruled over a multi ethnic, multi-religious empire, and wanted peace and prosperity for his Jewish subjects. Jewish people had contributed to the success of empires in the region, starting with Daniel and his friends, and the background to Nehemiah’s story is his concern for his people and the king’s respect for them.

Nehemiah 2:1-10

*1 In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before,*

*2 So the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid,*

vv.1-2. As he served the king, Nehemiah’s heart was full of the depressing news from Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s role probably meant that he usually listened to the king and rarely talked about himself. Yet, here the King could see that something was bothering his trusted servant and commented on it. Nehemiah’s emotions were on display and he felt exposed; in fact, he was really afraid. Because he did not know how the king would react, it took great courage to answer his question.

*3but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”*

v.3. What happened next required considerable courage. Nehemiah had faithfully served the King, but now after the usual statement of allegiance, he took a chance by revealing another loyalty, to a civilisation far from the centre of the Empire. And while Nehemiah’s mention of his ancestors might look individualistic, his concern was for the Jews as a people, an ethnic and religious minority within the kingdom.

How might we respond to Nehemiah’s concern about his people and their land? Things have moved on since his time, and the world changed at the first Easter.

Easter means that faith in God is no longer linked to ethnicity or land. No single ethnic group or piece of land on this planet is more special than another. The cross, the resurrection, Pentecost, and the expansion of the Church beyond the Jewish people fulfil Old Testament teaching and prophecy, and make faith and the Kingdom of God truly global.

It was always God’s plan to expand from the people and land of Israel in the Old Testament to the whole earth in the New. Building on Nehemiah’s example, through the new worldwide covenant brought by Christ, Christians are to be concerned for all people, and especially members of the church, irrespective of their ethnicity and where they live. Christ’s lordship over all the earth means we should be concerned for the whole planet, and not just one location.

Also, the centre of our faith is not a temple of wood and stone in Jerusalem but the glorified body of the risen Christ!

*4The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven,*

*5and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”*

vv.4-5. The cupbearer’s courage and faithful service to the king are vindicated. Although Nehemiah was afraid, the King’s reply seemed even-handed: *What is it you want?*

Nehemiah’s prayer and the way he replied to the king show a combination of faith and fear, trust in God and timidity before the king. Nehemiah was an important official and the king trusted him, so asking for time away from the imperial capital took a lot of guts, especially as he ended up serving as an administrator or even governor in Jerusalem. It’s quite a request from someone whose political and religious allegiance might be questioned by some.

He was able to do this because of his track record as a man of integrity, reliable and faithful. There is something very scriptural about serving God by giving our best to our work and our relationships. This was the foundation for the brave approach to the king.

We see more of Nehemiah’s courage and faith when he asked not that the king would *allow* him to go to Jerusalem, but that he would *send* him. The wily but faithful Jewish official wanted the king’s imprimatur on his personal mission.

*6Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.*

*7I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?*

*8And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.*

*9So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.*

vv.6-9. v.6. The King wanted to know the timeframe for the journey and the rebuilding. Nehemiah must have pinched himself as he heard the positive response. *It pleased the king to send me.* This was the perfect outcome, God’s response to his courage and faith.

Nehemiah’s entrepreneurial spirit kicked in and he asked for letters guaranteeing safe passage from governors on the way and even for the timber to repair the city gates. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose! And there’s a nice touch in v.9, when the king provided a cavalry escort for Nehemiah. God was honouring his servant’s courage.

*10When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

In v.10 not everybody was as open and straightforward as the King. Sanballat and Tobiah administered territory not far from Jerusalem and did their best to oppose Nehemiah’s work on behalf of the Jews. Nehemiah was no doubt aware of their attitude, yet was determined to head west and help his people.

The second text for today is Nehemiah 6:15-17, which focuses on the results of the work.

Nehemiah 6:15-17

*15So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.*

*16When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

*17Also, in those days the nobles of Judah were sending many letters to Tobiah, and replies from Tobiah kept coming to them.*

In the intervening chapters, despite opposition from outside and division within, the building project progressed. The initial phase was completed in a little over seven weeks. Nehemiah’s courage had been vindicated. Not only did he have the courage to approach the King, but also the bravery to cross Mesopotamia and enter Judah. On arrival, Nehemiah brought together and motivated a rather motley crew of builders and support staff, in the face of powerful opposition.

Nehemiah’s faith in God, courage, and sheer hard work saw the wall completed. The effect on the surrounding nations was a crisis of confidence as they realised that the work had been led by a brave and confident figure aided and blessed by God.

In passing, v.17 tells us that some of the Jewish nobles did not like this intervention from outside. Perhaps they preferred the *status quo* and felt threatened by Nehemiah’s actions. There’s nothing worse than opposition from within, is there? I am reminded of Jesus’ struggles with Jewish leaders who had a cosy relationship with Rome and Pontius Pilate.

Today’s readings append a short section from Isaiah to the two Nehemiah passages.

Isa 43:1-7

Although Nehemiah appealed to the king about Jerusalem’s physical infrastructure, it is clear that his concerns -- and God’s -- were much broader and deeper. Nehemiah’s sadness in front of the King was a comment on the spiritual condition of the city as well as its physical one.

This section from Isaiah 43 can be taken as a source of encouragement and inspiration for pioneers and visionaries such as Nehemiah. Verse 1 seems written for Nehemiah as he negotiated with the King and set off for Jerusalem. *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I’ve summoned you by name; you are mine*. In v.2 we learn how God would protect his servant through all kinds of trials. This was probably written about 200 years before Nehemiah’s birth and he would have been familiar with it.

In vv.5-6 the focus moves from the ancient Israelites to the present community of faith. Here, God is bringing his people from all points of the compass, from afar and the ends of the earth. This is now, as people from all over the world form the church. And v.7 reminds us that everyone who is called by his name exists for him and for his glory.

There is a tremendous sense of purpose here for individual believers like Nehemiah *and* for God’s community of faith, continuity between ancient examples of courage and the responsibilities of the church today. God has his hand on his servants, individuals and communities. He asks us not to be afraid; we have no need to fear. He is with us and his purposes are being achieved.

Let’s try and bring the story of Nehemiah’s courage into our own lives. We are not high-level officials working for autocratic leaders in foreign countries. God may not be entrusting us with that kind of important task.

But what might he be asking us to do? What do we see around us, in the church and in the world, that might make us look sad and downcast? Are there issues that we see, things that bother us, where we could make a difference? Are there people in authority of one kind or another that we need to approach and speak to? Do we need resources for what we think God is asking us to do? Is there opposition? Are there people who don’t agree with us? And depending on the issue, these people could be outside or even inside the community of faith.

Nehemiah’s experience can speak to us all. We are no different from Nehemiah, are we? God has chosen us and has empowered us. God will undertake for us and tells us not to be afraid. As we reflect on people of courage like Nehemiah, we see also their faith and witness, as well as God’s sovereignty and protection.

In the celebratory and triumphant atmosphere of Easter, let us ask God to speak to us, showing us our inward Nehemiah and outward responsibilities. May we be as sensitive and faithful as Nehemiah, and as determined and courageous!