

Rebuilding

Nehemiah 2:11-20 and Nehemiah 6:15 – 7:3

There's been a few famous walls throughout history – I always think of the walls of Jericho (which we remember came tumbling down) in the book of Joshua, but also Hadrian's wall (built to keep the Picts and other raiders out), and the Great Wall of China (which we remember from the Telstra ad was built to keep the rabbits out), and even in the last century, the Berlin Wall (although that was built to keep people in, rather than out).

In more recent times, wall building seems to have gone out of fashion – although I do remember one current world leader talking about building a 'big beautiful wall' which they were going to build and get Mexico to pay for... I'm not sure how that's going, but I think he's been distracted by other things lately.

The important walls, in ancient times, were city walls. Nations were centred on cities. The city's walls served as protection for the inhabitants of the city, but they also served as a show of the power of the city, and therefore the nation.

But in 445 BC, when Nehemiah – having been born and spent all his life in exile – journeyed to his ancestral homeland and arrived in Jerusalem, he found the city and its walls in ruins.

Nehemiah was, of course, a great man of God. In the lead up to today's readings, we are told that he was a faithful, trustworthy and prayerful man. He was the cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia. He was a trusted confidant of the most powerful person in the world – but he was also a servant of God. He prayed for

months, waiting for the right time to approach the king for permission to go to Jerusalem.

By God's grace the Persian king supported Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The king had given Nehemiah letters guaranteeing him safe passage and practical support. Letters that ensured Nehemiah enjoyed an uneventful journey to Jerusalem – a journey of more than a thousand miles – about four months travel.

There were already Jewish people in and around Jerusalem when Nehemiah arrived: although most of the people had been taken into exile by the Babylonians – a few had remained around Jerusalem. But after the Babylonians had themselves been conquered by the Persians, King Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return... The first group, around 50,000 with Zerubbabel, returned about ninety years before Nehemiah, with the aim of rebuilding the temple.

The second group of around 1500 men plus women and children, led by the prophet Ezra, had arrived in Jerusalem only ten years before Nehemiah. When Ezra arrived, he set about restoring the Jewish law, so that people would be living the way God wanted them to live.

But still, the city and its walls remained in ruins, and the people were miserable. The returning exiles had never re-established the city properly – they were living on the outskirts, and they had to step over and around the rubble of the city and its walls on their way from their homes to the temple.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, though, he waited. He didn't rush to start anything. Perhaps he rested. Perhaps he checked out who the local Jewish leaders were. We don't know.

I don't think I'd wait. If I was planning to rebuild walls, I'd be out there immediately with a tape measure and notepaper, and maybe some chalk to begin marking things out, and make a start of my list for my next trip to Bunnings.

Nehemiah didn't do those things... he just waited. He was patient.

But after the three days, he did start. He undertook a survey of what Jerusalem was like, and he did it with only a few others, and at night. Why at night? I guess because it was easier to get around, most people would've been inside at night. There wouldn't have been 'helpful' bystanders to give him advice.

Nehemiah's survey was very thorough. Through the Valley Gate to the Jackal Well, the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool and all the way back to the Valley Gate – a complete circuit of Jerusalem.

He saw the scope of what needed to be done. And then, he told the people what they needed to do: "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." (2:17) and he assured them that he was the person to do it – the gracious hand of God was on him, and he also had support of the king.

I think it's hugely important that he said "Let us rebuild the wall..." Us. Not you. This will be something that we do together.

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

That’s a pretty remarkable response, I think. I’ve been involved in a few building projects, both church ones and others, and they don’t generally have such a positive response. You probably know the usual responses as well as I do: “Let’s not rush into anything”, “We need to get three quotes”, “we tried to do that ten years ago and it didn’t work out”, “wouldn’t we be better off putting our money and effort into something else?”

But Nehemiah presented them with a compelling case – the truth – that the state of Jerusalem was a disgrace. A city without walls wasn’t a nation – couldn’t be a nation.

They wouldn’t just be rebuilding a wall: they would be rebuilding – and restoring – the nation. They would be rebuilding themselves as a people. The wall would give them confidence and hope. Jerusalem wouldn’t just be the city of their ancestors anymore; it would be their city as well.

Of course, not everyone was happy, and Nehemiah tells us of the reaction of Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab. I’ve heard a sermon which referred to them as ‘the three stooges’ – but they certainly aren’t comic relief. They were important and powerful opposition to Nehemiah’s plan.

Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, the province to the north, Tobiah, was the ruler of Ammon to the east and Geshem was the governor of the lands of Edom, Moab and parts of Arabia – to the south and east.

Between those three, Jerusalem and the land of Judah were surrounded. Those three were dangerous. Like Nehemiah, they would each ultimately answer to Artaxerxes, but Artaxerxes was a thousand miles away. They were bigger. They were stronger. They had walls around their cities.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem mocked and ridiculed Nehemiah and his plan. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?”

In the face of mockery and ridicule, Nehemiah didn’t boast in his plan or in the strength of his people – instead he boasted in God, saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”

So, under the leadership of Nehemiah, work began on rebuilding the walls. Chapter 3, tells us how extensive the work was... and also the variety of people who were involved, and Nehemiah lists priests, local rulers, servants, goldsmiths and merchants, men and women. I think it’s safe to say that everyone was part of this construction project.

...and we know that it was going well because when Sanballat and Tobiah heard what was happening, they were not happy and ridiculed the Jews and the wall they were building.

In the face of this ridicule, Nehemiah prayed again, “Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.” (4:4-5)

When ridicule failed to make a difference, the other rulers began plotting an attack – the walls had only reached half the planned height – the city was still quite vulnerable.

And not only was the city still quite vulnerable, but the people – the workers were becoming tired (4:10) and they were afraid of attack (4:12).

Nehemiah's response was to station armed guards at the most vulnerable points on the wall and reassure the people: "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

Nehemiah tells us when the enemies heard that God had frustrated the plot, the Jews all returned to their work on the wall.

The immediate threat was gone, but Nehemiah knew that opposition would still come. From then on, half the people would work, and the other half would guard. 4:17-18 gives us a picture of those "who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked."

By chapter 6, work on the wall was nearing completion, but the opposition was not done yet. Instead of focusing on the walls, they focused on the leader – on Nehemiah. Sanballat and Geshem sent him a message 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono' (6:2)

I think "Oh no!" was the correct response, because it wasn't difficult to guess what they had planned for Nehemiah. So he

responded, “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

They asked for that meeting four times, and four times Nehemiah rejected them.

The fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter with the allegation that Nehemiah was going to be king and had appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.” (6:5-7).

Ridicule hadn’t worked. Military attack wouldn’t work. Luring Nehemiah to his death hadn’t worked. So now Sanballat, tried to threaten Nehemiah with ‘telling the king’. And he did so in an open letter, so it might well put some doubt or suspicion into the minds of those around Nehemiah. It might well have put some doubt in the people’s minds: Nehemiah was successful... maybe he does want to be king?

Nehemiah denied it. And again, he prayed, he prayed for strength.

And still Sanballat and the others didn’t give up. The next incident was a strange one.

Nehemiah tells us “One day I went to the house of Shemaiah [and he] said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.””

That seems like a reasonable warning and a reasonable plan, but Nehemiah replied: “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” Because he realized that God had not told Shemaiah to say that, but that he had said that because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him to intimidate Nehemiah into committing a sin by and thus be discredited.

Only priests were allowed to go into that part of the temple behind the doors, but it would have been a good refuge from an assassin... and I’m sure it would have been a big temptation for Nehemiah. But since Shemaiah told him to do something contrary to the scriptures, Nehemiah understood this was another attempt by his enemies to stop the wall from being completed. He understood that Sanballat if he sinned by entering the temple, he would be publicly discredited in the eyes of his people.

Nehemiah 6:15, which began our second reading today, tells us that the wall was completed in fifty-two days.

It only took 52 days to rebuild the walls. After 90 plus years of being back in Jerusalem and walking around and through the ruined walls every day... it only took a couple of months. Why hadn’t they done it sooner?

People suggest explanations such as “it was God’s timing, not the people’s timing” or “it’s a progression from rebuilding the temple to restoring the law to rebuilding the law.”

We don't know exactly why, but we know they needed someone to come and save them. Not a warrior, not a priest, but a civil servant!

It's the same with us. We can't fix everything that's wrong with our lives, let alone everything that's wrong with the world. We can do some things, of course, good things, worthwhile things, but we need someone to save us, too. Not a warrior, not a priest, not even a civil servant – but a servant king. Jesus.

We are called to follow Jesus, to share the gospel, to love one another.

But there is just so much to do... and sometimes everything seems so terribly hard. It can be overwhelming. We can easily become like those ancient people walking past the ruins that could be rebuilt.

Why don't we do things sooner? That's a good question for us to contemplate. Those ancient people had waited 90 years to do something that took 52 days.

The completion of the walls wasn't the end of Nehemiah's story.

Chapter 7:1-2 tells us that after the wall had been rebuilt and [Nehemiah] had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. He put in charge of Jerusalem his brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do.

The walls had been completed, but there was still danger, and Nehemiah addressed that danger. The city and the people were safer, but they weren't secure. They needed to be faithful and vigilant.

The world of today is in many ways not like the world of 445 BC. But in many ways it is... the people of God, the followers of Jesus have declined in relevance to much of modern society, and we find Christians and churches mocked and derided. As followers of Jesus, how do we deal with mockery and threats from those around us? How should we?

We have, of course, been saved by Jesus, but just like those people of Nehemiah's time we need to be faithful and vigilant. To work to be God's people, holding fast to the truth, and sharing the good news.

Amen.