

## NEHEMIAH 6 v1-16 : NOTES FOR HOME GROUPS

**It helps to have the text of my sermon to answers some of these questions so I have provided a copy at the end. I've provided ten questions so please feel free to choose which ones you think it would be most helpful to discuss.**

### **Nehemiah**

1. This Biblical passage looks at the way in which evil forces try to prevent Nehemiah from fulfilling what God has asked him to do -

- by seeking to kill him by inviting him to meetings
- by seeking to lure him to a meeting (ostensibly to discuss undesirable rumours) where they can kill him
- by seeking to make him do things that will damage his reputation and so discredit him
- by seeking to intimidate him

How does Nehemiah deal with these attempts to kill him, discredit him, and intimidate him?  
What gives him the strength to persevere with the task of rebuilding Jerusalem?

### **A modern day Nehemiah : Martin Luther King**

2. God wants Nehemiah to build up walls so that Jerusalem will survive and revive and God wants MLK to tackle racial injustice and economic injustice and pull down the walls of prejudice, intolerance and hate.

What other leaders do you know who have shown that kind of clear calling - a. in the Bible. b. in the history of the Church?

3. Nehemiah and MLK look to God for strength to face the opposition. What strikes you about

- a. the prayer that MLK made in response to having his family threatened?
- b. the answer to his prayer?

4. MLK sought to change 'the moral compass' in America. What aspects of the moral state in Britain do you think need addressing?

5. We have seen in previous passages how Nehemiah was a skilful orator and also a leader who led by example. So was MLK? How important is it to match words with deeds?

6. What difference do you think it made that MLK had Jesus as a model (something that Nehemiah lacked)?

7. Look at MLK's words about how we have to respond in love and not hate. What strikes you about what he says? He obviously favoured non-violent methods. Do you think there are instances (e.g. a nation's response to invasion) when that is insufficient?

8. MLK had a dream for a better future. What is your dream?

9. Nehemiah and MLK achieved what they did by mobilising ordinary people to support their work. Can you share examples where you have been mobilised to do something because of the words and actions of someone else? How important is it to remember that God inspires and supports followers as well as leaders?

8. Nehemiah's enemies were not successful in their attempts to kill him but MLK's were. What is your response to MLK's description that his own life no longer mattered because he had fulfilled what God wanted and he had seen 'the mountaintop' ?

9 Read MLK's account of what he hoped people would remember him for. What would you like to be remembered for?

10. How important is to show God working through modern day Christians and not just through people in the Bible? a. to strengthen our own faith? b. to attract others to consider what Christianity can do?

Maybe you might like to share either how you see God working in your life or how you see God working in the life of someone else? (this person does not have to be famous)

### **The Sunday Sermon**

We've been looking in previous weeks at how Nehemiah set about rebuilding the defences of Jerusalem. We're reached the stage in the story where the city walls have been completely rebuilt and only lack the creation of a defensive gate. So it was now or never for the enemies of the Jews. They had to somehow destroy Nehemiah before that gate was finished. Their solution was to seek to lure him out so they could kill him. When their efforts fail they turn from trying to kill him to trying to discredit him. They tell him he needs to flee for safety into the Temple to avoid an assassination attempt, knowing that, if he did that, it would shatter his reputation among the Jews. For a non-priest like Nehemiah to enter the inner courtyards of the Temple amounted to sacrilege. The Jewish Law prohibited such behaviour. Nehemiah, of course, has the wisdom not to fall for such a trick. He just trusts in God and focuses on the task in hand. The thwarted enemies of Nehemiah then resort to sending him threatening letters in a vain attempt to try and intimidate him.

I don't think we need to dwell on the specific details of this passage. The ancient rebuilding of Jerusalem has not much relevance to us unless you are studying the Arab-Israeli conflict. What matters is the Bible's message and that is clear. Evil will always seek to destroy or discredit those who are seeking to fulfil what God wants. The response has to be to rely on your wisdom and on God's support. That message can be found lived out in the lives of the prophets who followed Nehemiah and, of course, in the life of Christ. It can also be found in the lives of many Christian leaders over the past two thousand years. So I thought maybe it was worth reflecting this morning on a modern-day equivalent of Nehemiah. For me that is Martin Luther King, who felt called by God not to build walls but to pull them down. Although we live in a society where racism is still quite common I am glad to say it is not nearly as prevalent and all-pervading as it was when I was a teenager -and that's undoubtedly because of what King said and did in the 1950s and 1960s.

Just as Nehemiah declared from the outset that God wanted him to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so King proclaimed his God-given mission from the outset : 'I look to a day when people will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character'. He commenced campaigning against racial segregation in America in 1955 when he was a young newly ordained minister in his early twenties. Like Nehemiah, he faced horrendous threats and intimidation almost from the moment he started. In January 1956 he received a phone call from a white racist not just threatening to kill him but to burn down his home and kill his wife and baby daughter. Like Nehemiah, King later recorded what he prayed in response to such threats. This was his prayer:

Lord, I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they

too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone

This is how God answered that prayer:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever'. Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same but God had given me an inner calm.

Three nights later King's house was bombed but it did not take away that inner peace he had been given. King called on all those who loved God to speak out against injustice, cruelty and inhumane treatment of any kind. He sought literally to change the nation's moral compass. 'In the end' he said 'we will remember not the word of our enemies, but the silence of our friends'.

King, of course, had one advantage over Nehemiah. He could look to model all his actions on Jesus. His growing success made his enemies redouble their efforts to destroy him. In 1958 he was stabbed and almost died, surviving only after emergency surgery on his chest and weeks of hospital care. His enemies made further attempts to kill him. They also secured his arrest and imprisonment on three occasions - in 1960, in 1962, and in 1963. However, King - like Nehemiah - remained 100% committed to carrying out what God wanted him to do. Like Nehemiah he inspired others to join in his work by his oratory. Here, for example, is a passage from a sermon he wrote on why love is more likely to change the world than hate:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality... it brings irreparable damage to its victims ...and it just as injurious to the person who hates..[Love shown to enemies] is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend... By its very nature hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature love creates and builds up. Love transforms.

King's Christ-inspired promotion of non-violent opposition to the racist laws in America brought him world fame. And, again like, Nehemiah, King did not just voice what God wanted. He led by example, organising and participating in a succession of marches, strikes, and boycotts. If Nehemiah inspired and motivated hundreds, King inspired and motivated countless thousands, not just in America but across the world. Black and white. He inspired me as a teenager. He still inspires me. It's why I chose in my retirement to write this book on slavery and on the legacy of racism it has left in its wake.

Many of you will have heard King's most famous speech - a 17 minute one given in Washington DC in 1963 to a crowd of over a quarter of a million people - the largest gathering of protestors ever achieved in American history. Part of it was an expression of hope:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed... that all men are created equal... I have a dream that..the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.... I have a dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers....

Part of it was difference faith makes:

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day....we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.

This was a God-given vision of a world freed from prejudice, freed from intolerance, freed from hate. And his speech helped put civil rights at the top of the American political agenda, helping facilitate the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which ended legal segregation in America. I have not time to recount the various campaigns in which King engaged after 1964 - and they were not just about black civil rights. He promoted the concept of world brotherhood, becoming an outspoken critic of the American war in Vietnam. He promoted what he called economic justice by campaigning for the rights of the poor. The more successful King was, the more his enemies, rather like Nehemiah's enemies, turned to ever more drastic measures to stop him. And here King's story at one level does not have the happy ending that Nehemiah's story has. On 4 April 1968 King was shot dead as he stood on the balcony of a motel . He was just 39 years old.

But King's death was not from his perspective an unhappy ending. We know that because his last recorded speech was a response to his friends who were concerned at the growing number of death threats he was receiving. In it he told them he had done what God wanted him to do and he was ready to hand on to others. Listen to what he said:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

It is important we always remember that God does not promise us all happy personal endings. What he promises is that he will always be with us and that we can rest assured that the ultimate victory is his. King knew his work would not die with his death. Just days after King's assassination, the American Congress passed the hugely important Civil Rights Act of 1968 and King became - and still is - an American icon. Since 2000 the U.S. marks his memory with an annual Martin Luther King Day and I think it's fair to say the U.S. would never have elected a black president like Obama but for King's input. And his legacy was not confined to America. His work encouraged the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa and civil rights movements in Britain, Ireland, and all across the world. On one occasion King was asked how he would like to be remembered. This is what he said;

I'd like somebody to mention ....that Martin Luther King.. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say ....that I did try to feed the hungry....that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked....that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison....that I tried to love and serve humanity.... I'd like people to say ...that I was a drum major for justice....a drum major for peace ... a drum major for righteousness.

I've shared all this with you this morning because I find it reassuring that God still works in our world as he did in the time of Nehemiah. But I also think it's important because we stand a greater chance of arousing the interest of non-Christians in Christianity if we can show them our God is a God of the present and the future and not just a God of the past. It enables us to quote from our Bibles with more authority if we can show that the truths in the Bible are as real now as they were in Biblical times, if we can show that God is still very much at work in *our* world.

So let me end by citing a Bible reading that both Nehemiah and Martin Luther King would endorse and then by saying a prayer. Here are some words from Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ...Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear...One thing have I asked of the Lord... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to look upon His temple. ...Wait on the Lord; be courageous and let your heart be strengthened; yes, wait on the Lord.

And now for the prayer:

Heavenly Father, help us to wait on you more. Give us the wisdom and strength we need especially when we face difficulties and dangers. We pray that you will continue to provide inspirational leaders like Nehemiah and Martin Luther King, people who will seek to carry out your will. May they overcome whatever opposition they face, strong in the strength that God alone can supply. And may we and others, like those who listened to Nehemiah and Martin Luther King, give our support to their endeavours whenever that is possible. And may we too rely on the Holy Spirit for strength and guidance and inner peace as we seek to play our part in whatever way we can. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

**GMB**