

Rebuilding the walls – Sam Waako

Nehemiah 1:1–11, Matthew 7:24–29

This sermon concludes our sermon series from these last couple of months on the 'New Normal,' looking at Israel's return from exile, where we have been picking out similarities and lessons from this biblical story to help us think about coming out from the COVID-19 pandemic into whatever God has ahead for us.

If you have had a chance to engage with any of the sermons, I wonder what has stood out for you in this series?

For me, it's seeing God continuously at work for His people and for His glory. Even in exile without the Temple that symbolised God's presence, God was still on the move. And on their return to the promised land, God was still on the move. 'God at work' is the theme that runs throughout this period for Israel's history.

Last week, Rachel was speaking about God building up His Church; in the context of the Israelites it was the Temple (God's dwelling place), in our context, Jesus is to be the new temple, God's dwelling place, the one who lives in us and in effect we become God's temple and God's spirit dwells in our midst. Ultimately, as we look to 'rebuild walls in the new normal, God is the builder Rachel said, and if we are faithful, He will not only rebuild us, he will use us to rebuild fellowships, relationships, Church (His people) and communities.

In my sermon this week as we conclude this series, I want to pick out three lessons from Nehemiah on how we can join in with what the Lord is already doing in rebuilding specifically the Church, God's people.

Although we now know that the temple had now been rebuilt after the exiles return, the walls that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed were still in ruins, leaving the city and the temple defenceless against enemy attacks. The citizens had tried to rebuild the walls but had completely failed due to the constant attacks from their enemies. And it seems like no one thought this obstacle would be overcome – the walls remained in ruin for a very long time (70 years after rebuilding the Temple) and the people not only stayed in trouble, but remained in shame.

As we venture into the new normal, looking around us today, are you aware of any 'broken walls?' Walls of your own devotional life? walls of your relationships? Your Church and community? Is there something of which perhaps you should be grieving about, just like Nehemiah grieved for Israel? The reality is that we are surrounded by brokenness, moral, spiritual, material, physical.

When we are confronted by brokenness in our society, what are some of the responses that we make? What lessons can we learn from Nehemiah?

Ask

I think the first lesson we can take away from these verses in Nehemiah 1 is that we need and have to ask where the brokenness is. We are told in Nehemiah 1.2 that when Nehemiah's brother (Hanani) with a few other people came to see him, he says, "I asked them about the conditions among the Jews there who had survived the exile, and about Jerusalem." To know the need, the brokenness, Nehemiah had to ask first.

Just like Nehemiah had the opportunity to ask when brother and friends visited, next week, with our 'living stones survey' (see Notes and News), we are going to be providing opportunity for people to ask where the need is in this parish and further, and see how all of us can use our time, skills and willingness to serve God through the church. Selfishly, It would be great to have a few more people signing up to help with youth work in the parish.

When Nehemiah asked, he saw/heard of the great need, which burdened his heart. What 'burden' might God be putting on your heart that He wants to do through you? God will use that burden as the basis for action.

Prayer

After Nehemiah had found out the need, the broken walls, and after he had grieved, he didn't just get up and take action, he prayed. Not just for a day or two, we are told he prayed for at least four months before he took the first action to approach the king to give him permission to go to Jerusalem.

Like Nehemiah, our first response ought to be to seek the face of God in prayer, to discover His plan, to receive His enabling to make a difference to the situation that is grieving our hearts. He took time to ponder on the anguish of the returned exiles, and it became his anguish, it was the motivation to intercede on their behalf, and he was ready to be part of the answer.

Sadly, prayer is often our last resort, for Nehemiah it was his first resort.

Alan Redpath writes, "*Recognition of need must be followed by earnest persistent waiting upon God until the overwhelming sense of need becomes a specific burden in my soul for one particular piece of work which God would have me do.*"

If prayer is not our first action, we will be like the foolish builder, who built his house on sand, when troubles come, the walls that have been rebuilt will eventually collapse because they are not built on the rock that is Christ through prayer

To build on the rock means to be a hearing, responding disciple. Practicing obedience becomes a solid foundation to carry out any actions God might be calling you and me to do. So we need to pray continually that God gives us a heart to feel the burden of hurting people's needs and the willingness to get involved where we can offer some help.

Community

Last week we saw how God used the community to rebuild the temple. And although God gave the burden and vision for His purpose to Nehemiah, the walls were eventually rebuilt by the whole community.

I read somewhere that “in spite of much opposition and numerous hurdles, **THEY** accomplished the task in just 52 days! Note the word ‘They.’

Whatever walls need rebuilding in our society, it’s more effective to do it as a community. Which is why I love the DIY SOS program on BBC, where Nick Knowles who is the presenter of the program gathers a team, issues a call to arms and recruit friends, family and local trades to help transform the homes of families across Britain (The need). God’s rebuilding process is going to involve all of us.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a text that not only summarises all I have to say perfectly but is also pertinent to ‘Rebuilding walls’ as we gradually enter into the New Normal. The text is from Amanda Udis-Kessler, a US hymnwriter, who wrote this text just after the 2020 US Presidential Election and has re-shared it following the violence at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021;

‘Rebuilding starts with weeping’

Rebuilding starts with weeping, with tears that fall like rain,

With full and honest grieving for years of loss and pain,

For suffering and sorrow that never had to be.

Rebuilding starts with weeping for all who are not free.

Rebuilding starts with praying, with hopes allowed a voice,

With visions for our country, with reason to rejoice.

We offer up our spirits, our hearts and minds and hands.

Rebuilding starts with praying for strength to heal our land.

Rebuilding starts with loving, with care for every soul,

With yearning in compassion that all may yet be whole,

That enemy and neighbour may know a better day.

Rebuilding starts with loving, for love will show the way