

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

It will also be available to listen to for one week from Sunday 11th October 2020 via telephone. The number to dial is 01875 444 495. Sunday 11th October 2020 – Nehemiah's Prayer

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison, and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

Today marks a new junction in the production of these podcasts because this will be first time that this podcast will contain the same prayers, bible readings and reflection that are being used at worship in our Church premises.

As you'll know by now, after 4 successful midweek services, we are now open on a Sunday morning too with plans to hold identical services on a Wednesday and a Sunday and for those to form the basis of our podcast too. This means that, whether we are at Church in person or at home listening in, that we all share the same basic act of worship.

This has been a challenging week for our country with announcements being made by the First Minister about further restrictions to our daily living, including extra restrictions in our own area of Lothian.

When announcements like that are made, they may, at one level be reassuring as we recognise that there are those who are doing their level best to keep us safe. At another level they may also be a bit unsettling because it throws the current situation into a much longer term process.

We wish for a bit more normality around us – whatever we mean by that!

That's why, today, I've chosen to focus our thoughts on the character of Nehemiah from the Old Testament who finds himself disturbed when he hears of how the walls of the city of Jerusalem lay waste. Nehemiah's response to the challenges of his day was one of prayer and that prayer, in turn, led him to commit to action that would help to turn their present reality around.

For just now though, before we pray, I want to read you some verses of Psalm 46. I know of a colleague of mine who has used these words every single week during these last 7 months at the start his worship services. They are powerful words of reassurance in the power and strength of God.

Psalm 46 verses 1 to 3:

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

*Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging*

Let us pray.

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Ever living and ever loving God, we acknowledge you, this day, as the ever present God too... the God who is our strength...the God who holds all things together even when it feels as if the ground under our feet is moving... even when events seem to overwhelm.

You are steady and you are an *“ever present help in times of trouble”*

We thank you for the faithfulness that you have shown to us during these recent months when we have found ourselves filled with concern and anxiety. We thank you for the way that you have brought steadiness into our lives... a sense of resolve and have surrounded us with care from others and from you.

So, as we worship you this day, we come to seek again the knowledge and the experience of your presence.

Forgive us therefore, Father, for those moments when we have lost our focus upon you centring our focus upon ourselves and our daily cares and concerns which we ought to have laid at your feet.

Forgive us for those cares and concerns which we brought to you but which we have taken away with us to mull upon on our own for a while longer.

During this time of worship remind us not only of the steady words of the Psalmist, but also of the way in which Nehemiah brings his cares and concerns to you knowing that you will listen to him and inspire him to deeper service and even more profound action.

God, our strength and our refuge, bless our worship and hear these our prayers as we bring them to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say and to pray, saying...

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Bible Reading – Nehemiah chapter 1 verses 1 to 11

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

3 They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people

of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Nehemiah – the man who, as one preacher says, cried about a wall! That same preacher then goes on to explore the various experiences that we might go through in life that could cause us to shed a tear.

Some folk cry at weddings – tears of joy (we hope!)

Some cry when their children go off to University – and I bet that will have been the case in these recent weeks as thousands of students headed off, for the first time, to their halls of residence only to find that the very first thing that happens to them is that they are told to stay inside for fear of either catching or spreading Covid 19.

And I am pretty sure that if Parents cried when their children left for University that not a few of those young folk would have found themselves, a few days later, crying down the phone at their parents - wondering what on earth they were supposed to do and perhaps asking - "Can I not just come home?"

What a dilemma – and I am glad that I haven't had to go through that sort of scenario with my own children when they were at University. I mean, we've all made the emergency dash for our kids or someone we love at some point, but this must be really tough.

Some folk, says that preacher, cry at sad movies... Folks forget the sad bit. I can shed a tear even when there's a happy ending! Goodness, folks – I even had a lump in my throat when Mrs Tembe left the lunchtime soap opera – Doctors - on BBC One...

By the way – where on earth has that programme disappeared to? It's been off air for months now which has completely wrecked my daily schedule...

Anyway, to get back to the point – Nehemiah cries about a wall... and so he does. The whole premise of the first chapter of Nehemiah is that Nehemiah is profoundly and deeply upset when he learns about the condition of the wall that surrounds Jerusalem which is, by all accounts, in a pretty tumble down state.

Of course, as we shall soon discover, the wall is actually symbolic of something much greater – the fate of his people... the fate of God's people.

Perhaps a bit of background is needed here... but just before we get to that, I wanted to highlight the reason that I chose to speak about this passage today – simply because this is the first time in around 7 months that we've been able to gather for Sunday worship in our Church building... (and I know that there are some who will be listening to this reflection at home on the podcast –

and I want to include you too in this because you are a vital and an ever present part of our church too).

We haven't even made it into the beauty of our sanctuary yet although, God willing we might be able to go back in their soon... we shall see...

And there are some of us that haven't been to an act of public worship for wholly 7 months... and when we get here, we're met with test and protect sheets.... Hand gel... socially distanced seating... masks... we're not allowed to sing... and, yes, it all feels a bit strange... a bit odd...

So perhaps there is a bit of Nehemiah in us today.

Perhaps there is that sense of dislocation... of things not being quite the way we remember them nor want them to be... or dream that they should be...

And yet, like Nehemiah, too, we are still drawn to the faith we have. Something about our faith has kept us going in these recent months – even in those days when, like Nehemiah, we've been laid low and, like Nehemiah, we've found ourselves turning to God more and more for uplifting and assurance.

And maybe... just maybe - like Nehemiah - we've found ourselves turning to prayer more frequently... and we've discovered anew that God really does listen to us.

The story of Nehemiah really begins about 100 years before our story is set in around the year 538 BC, the year when the Persians finally defeated the Babylonians under a King called Cyrus. Now the Babylonians being defeated had a significant set of consequences for the Jewish community.

Let me explain... You see, the Babylonians – about 50 years before this (in around 586 BC) - had, under King Nebuchadnezzar (yes, he of the Daniel story!) already defeated the people of Israel.

The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem – attacking its great temple, pilfering the religious artefacts, removing thousands of Jerusalem's occupants and bringing them back to Babylon. They also destroyed the City walls of Jerusalem into the bargain...

The place was a mess with only a small, impoverished remnant left in that once great city.

So, to get back to the Persian King Cyrus - when he realises that, having conquered Babylon, who had conquered Jerusalem, that he now has to deal with all of the dispersed Jews who now resided there, who were brought there by Nebuchadnezzar – well, he makes the decision to allow the Jewish community to now return to Jerusalem.

And thousands of them do return there under the leadership of two men by the name of Zerubbabel and Ezra. They go back to Jerusalem and they begin to rebuild the temple and the destroyed homes. They do an amazing job, given the circumstances. However, the one thing they could not fix and rebuild was that city wall.

Whenever they went near it, their enemies howled in complaint to the Persian King. They told the Persian King that the moment that wall was repaired that he would lose control over all of these people. The Persian King didn't want them in Babylon or in Persia but neither did he want to lose control of them altogether.

And this left the anomalous situation that whilst, on the one hand, the inside of the city was becoming more habitable than the walls of the city, on the other hand, were still in ruins... a constant reminder of the catastrophic defeat they had suffered 150 years before.

One of those who has gone back to Jerusalem was Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, whom, we discover early in our reading today, has come back to see Nehemiah who asks him, as you would expect, how things were in Jerusalem.

Hanani's account of what he, and his companions had seen when they got there, shook Nehemiah to the core.

Verse 3 of Nehemiah chapter 1, "*those who survived in exile and are back in the province (says Hanani) are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire*".

Now, as far as I can work out, Nehemiah has never lived in Jerusalem. Instead, he works as the cupbearer to King... an important role that meant he tasted the wine offered to the King in case it was poisoned... a trusted position...

Nehemiah was a loyal servant of the King and he had no particular history with Jerusalem itself. And yet, here he finds himself sitting on the ground weeping for that city, fasting and praying for what is estimated to be around 4 months – from the Autumn into the early Spring...

All he can think about was that great city not because it was where he lived, but because of its importance it had to his faith.

On top of that was the knowledge that there were many people there who were in need of help and support.

You see, as long as those walls remained broken down no one would invest in that city... After all, why invest in a city that cannot even begin to defend itself with strong walls around it?

And that's why Nehemiah prays... prays as he has never prayed before... prayed so that he could place this whole situation into the very hands of God.

As the old chorus goes:

Father, I place into Your hands

The things I cannot do,

Father, I place into Your hands

The times that I've been through.

Father, I place into Your hands

The way that I should go,

For I know I always can trust You.

Nehemiah's prayer is not a prayer of protest. He doesn't remonstrate with God about his lack of faithfulness. Instead, he simply acknowledges what has happened and he acknowledges that his own people had not done as they should have done. Their actions, in the past, have helped to lead to this day.

But what we also discover, as we read through his prayer, is that Nehemiah's own vision for what he wants now to happen starts to take shape... And more especially he begins to sense how he can be part of what now needs to be done to make things better...

And maybe that's a good place to draw these thoughts to a close today for there are times when prayer has to be our starting point too. As we face the challenges of these days, prayer must be that starting point... always our starting point...

And, as we pray, God does for us as he did for Nehemiah – encouraging us with a vision of how those walls – which have been destroyed and which, in their destruction, have brought tears to our eyes – can now be rebuilt and how we, ourselves, can be part of that rebuilding.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

During our prayers we are going to use a spoken response:

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayers

Gracious God, today we recognise the example of Nehemiah who found the reality of the tumbled down walls of Jerusalem too much for him to take in and who finds his response is to come to you in prayer, to place his cares and concerns at your feet where he finds the inspiration that would carry him on into a deeper service of you and others.

Father, before our worship is over, we come to you to seek you again in prayer, praying that you would hear us as you heard Nehemiah of old.

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayer

We bring to you those who bring us news of other lands, just as Hanani did for his brother Nehemiah... those who share the reality of what it is like to live in other places and whose words and understanding communicate something of the world in which we live to us. May there always be those who share news of the world with us and may their words be sincere and inspiring.

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayers

We bring to you those who, like Nehemiah – and often like ourselves – who hear those words and who yet feel a sense of powerlessness because they seem so great that we can do nothing in response. Help us to do, though, as Nehemiah did, and bring them to your throne of Grace in sincere and loving prayer.

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayers

We bring to you those who, like Nehemiah, find that their prayers are answered with a call to action and service. Inspire us, in our own day and age, with a sense of call to reach out to the world – to both pray and to act, even to do both at the same time - knowing that prayer and action are not opposites in the world of faith.

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayers

And we bring to you, as we have often done in recent weeks and months, those whose job it is to protect and keep us safe and secure during uncertain days. Bless all who work within the medical profession and those who care for others both at home and in care settings. May they know your blessing and your peace at this time.

M: Listening God

C: Hear our prayers

In Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction

Now may the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forevermore, Amen.