

## Sermon Transcript: 21 February 2021 (Richard Mortimer) – First Sunday in Lent

Well our story of Nehemiah continues. We're into chapter 6 now and in my Bible it's headed 'Further opposition to the rebuilding'. This is the third talk I've given on opposition in Nehemiah – the opposition that Nehemiah faced and that in itself tells us something, doesn't it? This was a recurring theme; something that carried on through his life, through his ministry and that in itself speaks to us doesn't it? That the Christian life is hard, that there are difficulties; this is a recurring theme of our lives and today, as we begin Lent - and I want to relate what we say here today to Jesus – we're reminded that we need to gird ourselves, we need to seek God's strength because the Christian life, as it was for Nehemiah, can be quite challenging.

Let's look at Nehemiah chapter 6. I identified in that passage, seven occasions of opposition. The first four were one particular sort, and then there were three other attacks on him. That's quite a lot! That's what he was dealing with. The first – it says here:

Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.

You would think that on the face of it, that this is nice; they're extending the hand of friendship perhaps – this is a good thing – but actually Nehemiah has the wisdom to see that this is a trap and at the very least it's a distraction but maybe also it's an ambush. So it says in verse 2: 'But they were scheming to harm me'. So he understood what was really going on here; he had wisdom from God, by His Spirit and could discern what was going on here. So he sends messengers (verse 3) to them with this reply:

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?

So he sees it that at the very least it's a distraction; it's slowing down the work, which is their tactic – it has been all along. That should speak to us immediately anyway, about this need for not being diverted, keeping on track with God, and this is Nehemiah's attitude. Verse 4 we read:

Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

Four times they persisted with that and he could see what was going on, and that gift of insight is so valuable and he had that, bless him. Then we read:

. . . the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter . . .

An open letter which is for anyone to see; it's like putting a letter in The Times, you know, anyone can see this! And he says:

'It is reported among the nations . . . that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. . . . you are about to become their king and have even 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 [King Artaxerxes in Persia]; so come, let us meet together.'

So he's really raising the stakes now – this is slander, this is accusation – how should Nehemiah deal with that? It would be very tempting – I think I might well have gone down and talked about it – but Nehemiah is not distracted from what his call and what his purpose is:

I sent him this reply: ‘Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.’

I like the strength of that rebuttal and again he had discernment to know that was the right response, because not always is that the right response, but he knew that a straight direct confrontation to rebuke that, was needed. So that’s the fifth attack he had and it says here:

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, Their hands will get too weak for the work.

Because to be accused of treason in a strong empire is very dangerous; they could feel very frightened by that if that rumour gets out and Persia – Artaxerxes hears of it – potentially he could send troops to kill them. This is serious but he’s not intimidated, he’s not persuaded; he knows that he was sent by the king of Persia, he’s clear in his call and what he’s doing, he’s not dissuaded. They’re trying to frighten him but he doesn’t succumb. Instead it says:

But I prayed, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’

That was attack number five. Attack number six:

One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. 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.’

The name Shemiah is similar to Samuel – that ‘shem’ sound – about listening, hearing – it means ‘hearing from God’ or ‘heard of God’ and he ostensibly is a prophet and he’s heard from God, this is what he’s claiming, that you need to hide; that someone’s out to get you. You need to hide in the Temple, lock the doors and you will be safe there.

Now there are lots of problems with this. One is, that not being a priest, Nehemiah is not allowed into the Temple sanctuary so actually, it’s a sin if he goes in there. What Shemiah – it turns out is a false prophet – is trying to do, is trying to undermine Nehemiah’s authority. He’s trying to faze him with threats, make him feel fearful, to hide. It’s interesting – was Shemiah shut in his home because he was praying, ostensibly, and giving an appearance of prayerfulness – or was it because he was creating a sense of secrecy that we need to shelter, creating that vibe of shelter, of sanctuary, of hiding – we’re not quite sure but it’s quite clear that Shemiah is trying to undermine Nehemiah; get him to be neurotic, paranoid, fearful, to hide in the Temple, to even sin by doing that, to weaken his authority. So he says:

... because men are coming to kill you – by night they are coming to kill you.’

So that’s his word to Nehemiah, but this is what Nehemiah says:

‘Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!’

So he’s asserting his authority – he’s not going to be intimidated:

I realised that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

There’s money behind this.

He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this [by going into the Temple], and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

So he could see through that. He had the strength of character and the spirit of discernment to discern that this was not a word from God but it was a paid, corrupt act trying to dissuade, put him off and weaken his authority. They were trying to discredit him.

The seventh attack isn't explicitly described in detail, it's just that in verse 14 we read:

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.

So here's another prophet – a lady prophet, a prophetess - Noadiah, trying to attack Nehemiah as well. We're not told how, but she and the other prophets are also trying to undermine him. That's pretty serious isn't it, when the people who are supposed to be God's spokespeople undermine you, and Nehemiah had all that to contend with. We see similar situations with St Paul in his letters to the church in Corinth; there are people voicing dissent against him, undermining his authority – he has to speak out to defend his authority. It was quite serious, that was for St Paul.

So here's Nehemiah under all these attacks – I listed seven – but then in verse 15 it goes on to say:

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

So just going beyond our passage today, we see that because he persisted, he pressed on, they completed the wall. At the start of our reading they'd done the wall but not the gates – the final bit that they were up to. Now they've done the wall and the gates – it's completed. So Nehemiah kept his focus and pressed on and fulfilled that.

Now as I was reading this, I found myself reflecting on Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, because he endured opposition, and let me just draw some parallels in our Lord Jesus Christ's experience. This sense of distraction – these four messages – 'come and talk with me, let's come and talk about this' – this sense of distraction. Well Jesus had to deal with distraction. He had huge crowds following him; he often went away in quiet to pray to refocus on God, to keep his focus. That's what he did; he would pray. Also he had a strong sense of his call. In Mark 1 v35-39:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'

Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.' So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

So he could have got distracted by the crowd, he could have got stuck in one place, but Jesus had to keep moving so he said, 'No, I'm not going to do that, I'm going to move onto the next village. We must preach the Kingdom of God'. He kept his focus. Prayerful, focused, doing the preaching, doing the ministry. Very instructive, his approach.

What about this thing where they slander him? They say: 'You are a rebel. We accuse you of rebellion'. Of course Christ had that at his trial. Again, I'm sticking with Mark, just for simplicity's sake (it's in the other gospels as well), but if you look at Mark 14 from v53 we see Jesus' trial:

They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree.

Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.”’ Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

They’re accusing him of rebellion, that he wants to destroy the Temple – the institution, the building – and he is silent. Now that’s different from Nehemiah; Nehemiah spoke out very strongly to defend himself. Jesus remains silent. I think part of that was because he had Isaiah in mind; Isaiah 53 talks about the Lamb of God being silent before the ‘shearers’ – I’ll read that verse - Isaiah 53 v7:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

So Christ was silent for the most part. He did reply once or twice in his trial but basically he adopted a different stance; it was just a silence. Sometimes you have to know what to do, whether to speak out or be silent! Jesus and Nehemiah both knew what they needed to do. If you’re ever in that situation you might want to speak to someone for advice – ‘what shall I do? I’ve been accused of something’. It happens sometimes and you need to just get advice and do the right thing. So Jesus knew what it was to be accused and slandered.

And what about this thing of someone being paid to undermine you, to attack you, to give you false advice? This prophet Shemiah who gave false advice. Well a couple of things come to mind. Do you remember Peter gave Jesus bad advice? I’ll read you this – Mark 8 v31-33:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’

Jesus knows he’s got to go to the cross and Peter doesn’t want it, he’s trying to advise him: ‘No don’t go, don’t go.’ Bad advice; not in this case out of money, but out of love for Jesus; he doesn’t want him to die. It’s bad advice, but Jesus has the discernment and the knowledge and the call to say ‘no’ and to rebuke that, just as Nehemiah rebuked Shemiah’s advice: false counsel, false advice.

Then what about this last lady, this prophetess, Noadiah? How she and the rest of the prophets tried to intimidate him. So again we’ve got, presumably for money, people trying to undermine

Jesus. It's betrayal isn't it? These are people he should be trusting but they are undermining him. Jesus was betrayed for money – Judas, you remember - for thirty pieces of silver, led the authorities to Jesus so that he could be arrested and killed.

So Jesus experienced all these things that Nehemiah experienced – he experienced betrayal, he experienced accusation, he experienced false counsel, he experienced distraction but he persisted. Indeed, I'm reminded of a beautiful little passage in the book of Hebrews – Hebrews 12. It's looking back to the previous chapter where he lists lots of Old Testament heroes and then in chapter 12 v1-3 we read:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12 v1-3 – a beautiful little passage to inspire us to persevere. Jesus endured; Jesus persevered; and the thing about Jesus going to the wilderness for those 40 days of fasting was that he needed to prepare. His ministry was probably the toughest and he had to have the roots, the rootedness in God to get through that. He fasted, he prayed, he prepared himself and went forward into ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I was struck in my preparations how Nehemiah had gifts from the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit was upon him. He was one of these Old Testament characters, like Samson who had power from the Holy Spirit; Moses had prophetic powers from the Holy Spirit and saw God face to face, but here Nehemiah has the real gift of wisdom and discernment, distinguishing between spirits. This is in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 - you can read these gifts of wisdom, distinguishing spirits.

Nehemiah had that giftedness, that wisdom from God. He could see, he was prepared, he was a man of prayer; he was rooted and so he could duck and dive and dodge these bullets so to speak – these attacks, arrows, these darts – he could dodge them because of that.

Jesus was prepared, he had those roots, and he endured. The word endurance occurs twice in that little verse from Hebrews. It says, 'He endured the cross' and then it says 'Consider him who endured such opposition'. We read also in that little section about him persevering, running the race, and that's our call. I looked up the word 'endurance'; if you look at endure, endures, endurance – all those endure words – there are thirty three in the New Testament – that's a lot! Why? Because we need it. We need to hear that word. We are in a marathon; this whole experience of the pandemic has gone from being a few weeks, a few months; now we're looking at years. We are a year in – one year on – and it's going to be many more months yet before we find some sort of normality and therefore we need endurance. We need to have a marathon mind-set. Keep jogging, keep moving, keep a little bit of refreshment, keep things going, in order to endure. But you see we have Christ on our side; Christ the great perseverer – as it says in Hebrews 12 it says: 'Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross'. OK? Keep your eyes on Jesus, keep enduring and ask for the Holy Spirit. We, like Nehemiah, need wisdom; we need discernment – how to cope, to make decisions – you know? What should we do today? Should we go out, should we stay? Pray about these decisions, seek the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit.

I was thinking about the Christian life. You know the New Testament and the Old likewise for Israel, the people of God in the Old Testament, there's no illusion that it's going to be easy but what there is, is a promise of God being with us. I found myself thinking that the Christian life is a bit like trying to launch a rocket and get it out into outer space. The force of gravity pulls you down, you know? It pulls you down. You see the size of the rockets they need to get out, you see the force that they need to get out of earth's gravity and the struggle, and in a sense, that 'fuel' is the Holy Spirit. If you look at a Saturn 5 rocket it's as tall as a big building full of those fuels that send the power to get them going. We need that Holy Spirit power; we need that '*dunamis*' that dynamite from God – power from God, and we need to keep our eyes on Jesus. This is hard – it feels harder somehow, doesn't it as it goes on longer? But we need to bed down, keep resting on our Lord, keep our eyes on him, keep praying for the Holy Spirit and we can overcome.

Nehemiah overcame; he did build that wall – he did build it, we read that in verse 15 and we can rebuild. We can build, and again an ongoing prayer is for wisdom and guidance how we can rebuild. As a church we will change – we will come out of this different and our focus will need to subtly shift; our focus will need to be one of compassion towards our community. We need to re-gear ourselves up to care for Dartford, to care for our neighbours, our loved ones around us because the needs are growing; they're not diminishing, they're growing.

So - we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on the Kingdom, get the Holy Spirit's power and start to rebuild and recognise that the compassion of Christ is going to be our call and our mission as we move forward as we rebuild.

So what I want to do to wrap up is pray – pray for the Holy Spirit and pray for us to keep our eyes on Jesus. I will give you one more verse I wanted to share which relates to our opening song actually – Joshua 1 verse 9 – you will recognise this verse; it's the words of the song we just sang: 'Be bold, be strong for the Lord your God is with you':

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

So let us pray:

Holy Spirit, come to us now we pray. Lord Jesus, help us see you more clearly. Help us to realise that you went through so many trials. You are with us. You promise you will never leave us. Come Holy Spirit, renew our hearts; strengthen us for this marathon. In Jesus' name. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

Catherine's going to lead us in another song now; it's a beautiful song: 'I'm no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God', and please may you . . . continue in God's presence, continue to seek the Holy Spirit and know that you are his child; he loves you and therefore your fears can diminish. He will give you strength. His Spirit will carry you through. His Spirit is powerful enough for this journey. Amen.