

**Sermon, Morning Worship, St Mary Magdalen, Thorrington 11 10 2020.
Nehemiah 5: 1-19.**

May the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight O God our strength and Redeemer. Amen. Please be seated. The book of Nehemiah is rather like a diary gifted to us. Nehemiah means, God has comforted.

The role of leadership is never easy! This was the experience of Nehemiah, whose attention was diverted from the enemies of God's people and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem to the pressing problems of hunger and exploitation. Now the building up of the walls came to a screeching halt. This time the troublemakers were not foreign adversaries but some 'get-rich-quick' people taking advantage of a famine to make some easy money from their own kinsmen. This new threat struck 'at the exiles' most precious asset, their unity'. How would Nehemiah come to grips with this setback? The opening verses of chapter 5 tell us: "And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. For there were those who said, "We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live." There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards." It isn't unusual for money problems to create strife and completely disrupt what God wants to do. If Nehemiah and his people did not find a way to do what God wanted them to do with their money and money problems, the work of God would be stopped without a single arrow being fired by the enemies of God.

Three groups of labourers and landowners came to Nehemiah with their grievances 'against their Jewish brothers' (5:1). These complaints were substantiated by their wives, who were struggling to feed their ravenous children (5:2). The 'shrill voices' of these women' add to the intensity of the meeting' with Nehemiah.

Consider the labourers. Manpower had been re-channelled from raising crops to building walls, resulting in a shortage of food. This situation was aggravated by three

things: the large families of the labourers (5:2); the widespread famine (5:3); and the considerable tax payable to the Persian king (5:4). Some of the labourers may have felt that too much was being sacrificed to Nehemiah's project. "After all," as such citizens might have put it, "you can't eat walls".'

The landowning farmers were compelled to sell everything they could lay their hands on to raise money for food (5:3). Some had no choice but to pay mortgages with exorbitant rates of interest to the 'loan sharks' (5:4,). Failure to pay back the mortgages resulted in the immoral money-lenders selling the sons and daughters of the debtors into slavery (5:5). Essential to handling money with the right heart before God is being a giver. Being a giver to the work of the Lord helps us always remember that God and his Kingdom come first.

This kind of treatment was all the more galling and despicable because it came from the hands of their 'Jewish brothers' (5:1), those who were 'of the same flesh and blood ... our countrymen' (5:5). These men also had children—'Our sons are as good as theirs'—and should therefore have felt the anguish of the parents whose sons and daughters were dragged away and sold as slaves. 'We are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others' (5:5), was the depressing lament of the demoralized Jews as they surveyed their land.

Nehemiah responds to the complaints (5:6–7) And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. Nehemiah became angry because these money problems led to a lack of unity among the people of God. This unity that was more precious than any amount of money. After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." This was great leadership from Nehemiah. He was a man passionate enough to get angry; but wise enough to not act until he had considered the matter carefully. So he called a great assembly against them. Although Nehemiah was extremely busy with the wall-building enterprise, his reaction was not one of impatience or irritability, but of sympathy and interest. He dropped everything to concentrate his thoughts on the outrage of his workers.

Their grievances touched him deeply. We also learn that we should act only after careful consideration as did Nehemiah. It's rather like ignoring a leak in the bathroom taps. A few moments today repairing the leak will save a hefty bill tomorrow when the whole bathroom is flooded with water! Consider verses 5, 6 and

7: 'When I heard their outcry and these charges ... I pondered them in my mind' (5:6, 7); then, and only then, did he set about solving the problem. It is better to nip in the bud any potential difficulties within a church rather than let them bloom into a major crisis in the future.

Nehemiah was 'very angry' (5:6) when he heard of the rich Jews oppressing their poor countrymen. His anger was the measure of his concern, or love, but this concern was controlled and constructive. It isn't sinful for a Christian to express his or her anger. Jesus himself gave vent to this emotion but we must be on our guard lest our wrath boil over into sinful anger. We need to remember the words of the wise man Solomon: — He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit is better than than he who takes a city.

It was the injustice of the rich Jews oppressing the poorer members of their own race that triggered off Nehemiah's anger. Ought not the injustices of our age cause us to be angry? Our anger is unproductive if it does not lead to some attempt to deal with what gave rise to it. The sequel to Nehemiah's displeasure was a solution to the problem. We ought to be irate about social injustice, and even more angry that Satan enslaves sinners and blinds their minds so that they reject the teaching of the Bible and rush on towards hell. If Christians, who still have a sinful nature, are vexed because of the social evils which they see all around them, and at the rejection of God's Word on every hand, how much more must God, who is holy, be displeased because of sin?

Nehemiah resolves the complaints (5:7–13)¹. He confronts the nobles (5:7–8) After serious thought, Nehemiah rebuked the nobles and rulers and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Nehemiah did not flinch from the unpleasant task of confronting the nobles with their sin. Their transgression against God was notorious; therefore he convened 'a large meeting to deal with them' (5:7). The culprits were faced head on and their sins publicly exposed. Nehemiah emphasized the enormity of the nobles' wickedness. The nobles could not refute the charges which Nehemiah laid against them because their sins were infamous and their own consciences condemned them so that 'They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say' (5:8). Nehemiah calls the nobles to 'walk in the fear of our God' (5:9–10) and he said: "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, because of the

reproach of the nations, our enemies? This is where many business deals go wrong before God, because there is no regard for God's will or wisdom. The only concern is if a deal can be made, and if money will come from it; not if it is right or wrong. Nehemiah now says, "I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Nehemiah describes this fear as 'reverence for God' in verse 15. The consequence of this fear is obedience to all the commands of God contained in his Word. Nehemiah was compassionate and generous to God's people because he had this awe of God, whereas the rich had no respect for their fellow Jews because they had no respect for God. Therefore they were squeezing their Jewish brothers for all they could get rather than offering interest-free loans as Nehemiah was doing.

The person who possesses the 'fear of God' remembers that his treatment of other people will be assessed by God on the Day of Judgement.

Jesus taught in the parable of the sheep and goats that kindness shown to his people, is kindness shown to himself. We cannot be saved by our good deeds, but we are certainly not Christians without them. A lesson we may draw from the end of verse 9 is that if we, as professing believers, lack this fear of God, it will invite the taunts of unbelievers against the faith and our God. The most unholy sinner is quick to label the inconsistent Christian a holier-than-thou hypocrite and thereby excuse their own evil behaviour.

He commands the nobles to promise compensation (5:10–13) No more charging interest on loans, return land and property to the rightful owners.

The overwhelming response of the officials, 'We will give it back ... We will do as you say', and was acted on at once by Nehemiah as he summoned the priests to witness the promises of 'the nobles and officials' (5:12). Nehemiah was not going to allow them to have second thoughts and then change their minds!

The solemnity of the oath was impressed on the nobles by Nehemiah's gesture of shaking his robe. Why did these men, who had so much to lose, agree so readily with Nehemiah's demands? There may have been various contributing factors which brought about this change of heart, such as a feeling of guilt, or the courage of Nehemiah, but the origin of this turnabout was surely God's power at work in their hearts.

The rich who did not assist the poor would themselves become poor. The 'whole

assembly' vocally added their assent to the vows of the nobles and officials, and later performed the promises made (5:13). Nehemiah notes in his diary that this memorable day concluded with a crescendo of praise to God. The day which began with pain ends with praise!

Nehemiah's leadership (5:14–19) The last six verses:

At this stage in his narrative Nehemiah reflects on his style of leadership during his twelve years as governor from 445 to 433 BC.

What principles shaped the character of this governor of Judah and man of God throughout those twelve years? He was selfless and generous and he was entitled to levy a food allowance from the Judeans but chose to cover his entertainment expenses out of his own pocket rather than place 'a heavy burden on the people' Verse 18 reveals that his food bill was an enormous one! The governor of Judah was renowned among 'the surrounding nations' for his lavish hospitality and magnificent generosity (5:17). It is evident from these verses that Nehemiah had private resources accumulated during his service as the cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes. God blessed Nehemiah with prosperity but he did not make a god of his prosperity, but rather used it for the glory of God as he served others. The friendliness of Nehemiah is set in striking contrast to the selfish and greedy outlook of some of the previous governors (5:15). Whether we have much or little of material prosperity we ought to copy the example of Nehemiah and be selfless and generous. We who have freely received the grace of God should freely share with others whatever we possess. We may open our homes to a brother or sister in Christ and discover that we have entertained an angel! Abraham literally welcomed angels without realizing it. He was single-minded. Nehemiah jots down in his memoir, 'I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work' (5:16).

Nothing is accomplished in the Lord's work without this single-mindedness.

The godliness of Nehemiah is encapsulated in the words found in verse 15:

'Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.' His awe of God was the source of his piety and the driving force behind his service for God. Nehemiah was a man who loved God and therefore loved his neighbour as himself. We need to know God better. Nehemiah's prayer, 'Remember me with favour, O my God' (5:19), makes it clear that he was a man who

was 'motivated by his knowledge of who God is, and strengthened by the assurance of what God can do'. We should be glad that God took this personal diary of Nehemiah and gave it to us. It shows us that a leader must first lead by example, and that Nehemiah could tell others to do what was right here because his own walk was right. His public words and private actions said the same thing. Nehemiah's request, "Remember me with favour O my God", should be ours as we build the city of God's church.

Amen.