

Sermon for Evensong on the 16th Sunday after Trinity, 6th October 2019
Nehemiah 5.1-13; John 9 - see <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=437270702>

‘By the waters of Babylon’, as we know from Psalm 137, the people of Israel were in exile and were not happy: ‘.. we sat down and wept: when we remembered thee, O Sion.’

But then King Cyrus of Persia captured Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to their ancestral land and to rebuild the Temple. If you look at the Book of Ezra, chapter 1, you will read the text of Cyrus’ proclamation:

The LORD the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he himself has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. To every man of his people now among you I say, God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD the God of Israel, the God whose city is Jerusalem. And every remaining Jew, wherever he may be living, may claim aid from his neighbours in that place, silver and gold, goods or pack-animals and cattle, in addition to the voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem. [Ezra 1. All Bible translations in this sermon are from the New English Bible - see, for this passage, <http://www.katapi.org.uk/NEB/master.html?http://www.katapi.org.uk/NEB/IntroContents.php> and *mutatis mutandis* for the other passages quoted]

Well, that’s the background to our Old Testament lesson, from the Book of Nehemiah. The Old Testament books 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, are all reckoned to have been written by the same person, known as the ‘Chronicler’, and in the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are all one book. Nehemiah was the Persian king’s ‘cup-bearer’, in other words a senior official of the royal household, a Jew, who led a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem with a view to rebuilding the city and the Temple. Clearly his entourage looked to the local population, under the terms of Cyrus’ edict, to supply them with the wherewithal to get the job done and get fed and watered.

Note that: ‘... every remaining Jew, wherever he may be living, may claim aid from his neighbours in that place, silver and gold, goods or pack-animals and cattle, in addition to the voluntary offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem’.

It didn’t go well initially.

THERE CAME A TIME when the common people, both men and women, raised a great outcry against their fellow-Jews. Some complained that they were giving their sons and daughters as pledges for food to keep themselves alive; others that they were mortgaging their fields, vineyards, and houses to buy corn in the famine; others again that they were borrowing money on their fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax.

You might perhaps expect at this point that Nehemiah, perhaps with an additional edict from King Cyrus, would have said that, for the greater good of the enterprise, they had to make sacrifices. 'Blood, tears, toil and sweat', in Churchillian terms, or something more prosaic but equally tough, like that which came out under Margaret Thatcher or George Osborne; you might expect to have heard an austerity message, but from 500 BCE. 'Just make do and put up with less: there is no alternative.'

But no: look at the fascinating exchange which actually did come next.

'But', they said, 'our bodily needs are the same as other people's, our children are as good as theirs; yet here we are, forcing our sons and daughters to become slaves. Some of our daughters are already enslaved, and there is nothing we can do, because our fields and vineyards now belong to others.'

It's an explicit appeal to the principles of human rights, that people have worth and enjoy rights, simply by virtue of their being human. It's the sort of language which William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect used 150 years ago. Now Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, given direct effect in this country by the Human Rights Act 1998, prohibits slavery and forced labour.

In Nehemiah's world, slavery was normal. Some people were free, and some people were slaves. But of course slavery is not consistent with the idea of human rights - and those rights, for Christians, Jews and Moslems at least, come from God. We believe that all of us are equal in the eyes of God: all are created in the image of God. Nehemiah understood and accepted that. This is what he wrote.

'I was very angry when I heard their outcry and the story they told. I mastered my feelings and reasoned with the nobles and the magistrates. I said to them, 'You are holding your fellow-Jews as pledges for debt.' I rebuked them severely and said, 'As far as we have been able, we have bought back our fellow-Jews who had been sold to other nations; but you are now selling your own fellow-countrymen, and they will have to be bought back by us!' They were silent and had not a word to say. I went on, 'What you are doing is wrong. You ought to live so much in the fear of God that you are above reproach in the eyes of the nations who are our enemies.'

And he, Nehemiah, the governor, and his entourage, gave up their right to extract tribute from the local population, and indeed, in the next bit of the story you'll see that Nehemiah and his colleagues even gave up their salaries, so that he didn't put a burden on the local people.

Let us give up this taking of persons as pledges for debt. Give back today to your debtors their fields and vineyards, their olive-groves and houses, as well as the income in money, and in corn, new wine, and oil.' 'We will give them back', they promised, 'and exact nothing more. We will do what you say.' So,

summoning the priests, I put the offenders on oath to do as they had promised. Then I shook out the fold of my robe and said, 'So may God shake out from his house and from his property every man who does not fulfil this promise. May he be shaken out like this and emptied!'

Who says that our religion and our sacred texts are not political? Nehemiah was a minister in the government of the king of Persia. He was for 12 years the governor of the land of Judah, and he made very important decisions, as we saw, affecting the personal taxation of the population. He abolished slavery in Judah. In Judah under Nehemiah, people had intrinsic worth, and they were not a commodity which could be bought and sold. But the reason for this, the justification for it, in Nehemiah's eyes, was his 'fear of God'.

'You ought to live so much in the fear of God that you are above reproach in the eyes of the nations who are our enemies.'

It wasn't the case that religion was on one side, in a separate compartment, if you like, and practical matters such as politics were on the other. When I read this passage again the other day I was struck by its contemporary resonances: if some people are so poor that they are sold into slavery; if they lose their homes; have to borrow money to pay for food to eat.

'Our bodily needs are the same as other people's, our children are as good as theirs; yet here we are, forcing our sons and daughters to become slaves.'

That could be a criticism of quite a lot of the Anglo-Saxon world today. In the USA we read that there are 13m people living below the poverty line. In this country, as I'm sure you'll be fed up of hearing me tell you how many people have to resort to food banks. In this really prosperous area, in the borough of Elmbridge, there are three food banks, and in the Cobham one we are distributing an average of ¾ tonne of food every week.

And yet, by contrast, here we are, blessed with lovely houses, nice clothes, enough to eat, decent cars and all the good things of life. What are we supposed to do?

I went to a very interesting breakfast lecture given by a new recruit to the Diocesan staff, who is a very interesting minister, a newly-ordained Deacon called Jens Mankel, who has come to live and work in Guildford Diocese from a church in Frankfurt. It was all about making Christian faith a living reality, a compelling reality, in today's world, here in Surrey.

We find it easy to have mother-and-toddler groups, women's breakfasts, men's breakfasts, parish lunches - what used to be called Agapés - 'faith suppers': good fellowship, love for our fellow men and women - but, perhaps we have to be honest - only up to a point. Very few of the people who come to the mother-and-toddler group

actually come into church, or do anything that is a church activity. Some do: we have had some baptisms, and confirmations, which began at 'Mothers and Others': we have a number of volunteers working for the Foodbank who are active members of the various churches around here. Three of the trustees of the Foodbank are from St Mary's, for example. But they're only a minority.

But what are we doing about refugees? We now have seven refugee families in this area, and one Kurdish couple staying with me. Until people have obtained confirmation that they have been granted asylum here, they are not allowed to work, and they receive a hand-out of £35 a week. That makes it very hard to get by.

I would suggest that we ought, as a church, to adopt some outward giving charitable targets. Maybe one domestic focus and one overseas.

What do you think? If those aren't the sort of things we should be involved in as a church, what else could we do, if we wish to follow Jesus? Do we feel compelled, do we feel that, like Martin Luther, we 'can do no other', because of the very fact of God and Jesus in our lives?

Or are we still to some extent tentative? Well, I don't think there's anything necessarily wrong with that. He who is not against us is for us. Perhaps I can call this 'Nehemiah's Challenge'. Put yourself in Nehemiah the governor's shoes, but here in Cobham, in Stoke D'Abernon in 2019. What would you say, what would you do, if you were the Chief Executive? Who is your king?

For Nehemiah, Cyrus was his king. But more than any earthly king, Nehemiah feared - revered, respected, even loved - his Lord. I pray that it may be so for us too.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant