

Nehemiah 8:1-10

This morning we will make a short journey along the A14; take in a bit of the Australian outback and spend some in Jerusalem. There is also some time travel in store. I had hoped that the vergers might pass amongst you with refreshing drinks and hot towels, but I am afraid they suffer from travel sickness and they are lying on their bunks; you are on your own.

Jerusalem first. That was where we went with our first lesson

all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate

We were listening to Nehemiah. The year is 444 BCE, the Athenians have begun to build the Parthenon, Sophocles is writing tragedies, but if you are British the best you can hope for is a hill fort and there were no theatres. The great world empire, in 444, is not Greek, or Roman, it is Persian, ruled over by Artaxerxes. If I ever get another cat, I would like to call him Artaxerxes. Now, the Persians had been in power for a hundred years, and they have freed the captives and exiles they found in Babylon. Those exiles were Jews who had gone home to Jerusalem the city that the Babylonians once destroyed. The story of Nehemiah, the story we heard from this morning is the story of a man, who returns to Jerusalem, when it is still in ruins, and sets about rebuilding the city walls. Nehemiah chapter two describes him arriving in Jerusalem

I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire Nehemiah 2:13

And that makes Nehemiah a rather topical figure. On the day of his inauguration, as President of the United States, Mr. Trump went to the cathedral Washington and heard a sermon. He had chosen the preacher carefully, a Southern Baptist minister called Robert Jeffress. Mr Jeffress is what you might call a *controversial* figure. He thinks Roman Catholicism is a 'counterfeit' religion, and that Jews and supporters of Hillary Clinton will go to hell. That day in Washington Robert Jeffress told Mr. Trump about our friend Nehemiah,

God instructed Nehemiah to build a wall around Jerusalem to protect its citizens from enemy attack. You see, God is NOT against building walls!

Nehemiah came back to a city in ruins and a city that had lost its faith. The Temple had been destroyed, the priests had been taken into captivity or scattered. Local people who had remained had made up their own rules. They had had to do that. Nehemiah gave them back the city and the faith. It is a great story. What we heard, this morning, was the moment the Jewish law returned to Jerusalem. We heard this:

the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, ... He read from it ... from early morning until midday...and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law...

Nehemiah knew that this was a great day.

"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD

Nehemiah was reminding people how to be holy, what you must be, what you must do. He was summoning them to something better. No wonder he celebrated. But, there was a problem. Nehemiah, who was a governor in Jerusalem, and Ezra the priest, had both been exiles. They came to Jerusalem and told the people there what they must believe. They imposed the faith. They found chaos and they insisted that only they and people like them could be trusted to teach and govern. His book is full of lists of people you can trust. And these 'good men' (they were all men) insisted on change. They demanded that any Jew who had married a foreign wife must divorce. All those relationships that had grown up amongst the tribes and faiths around Jerusalem must end. Jews must marry Jews. If you read on in Nehemiah, you will find this

When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. Nehemiah 13:3

'Them' and 'us'.

A Jewish scholar working on Nehemiah told a story about being a more liberal Jew amongst the orthodox on a long summer camp. He pursued a young woman that summer, wooed her and finally tried to kiss her. 'Oh No', she said 'You are not Jewish enough for me'. He goes on

If we Jews are to be true to our Covenant with God... we must guard always against the slightest physical or moral union with those not chosen by God...

'Them' and 'us' that is the Book of Nehemiah. It is written in crisis, in adversity remember, and in crisis you make boundaries. 'Them' and 'us'. Nehemiah was arguing that faith is *this* and it is not *that*. He distinguished 'them and us'.

That wall we keep hearing about, the one on the border with Mexico, is an attempt at segregation, built on a sense of crisis. You may remember Mr Trump speaking in 2015

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. ...They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

It is 'them and us'. Some of the conversations in our own country – remain or leave, migrants or refugees – it is 'them and us'. We are building a language of crisis and we are drawing the lines. Nehemiah would agree with us, he would say this is religious duty. This is how you learn how to be holy.

We have been in the shallows so far Nehemiah and walls, Nehemiah and them and us, Nehemiah and how can we be holy. Now for deep water and those other journeys I mentioned.

I promised you a short trip down the A14. It is the road that runs north-west from Cambridge. 25 miles from Cambridge you could turn off and find yourself at a place called

Little Gidding. In the 1620s a holy family, the Ferrars lived there, prayed in the Chapel every day, studied, and read the psalms over and over. It is a mildly famous place, T S Eliot wrote a poem about it that gets quoted often (usually by people who have not read the whole long poem right through). He talks about arriving at Little Gidding

*You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.*

It is actually a great poem, pretty tricky, but pretty wonderful. T S Eliot thought Little Gidding was holy place, he was writing about what holiness looked like. He thought it was kneeling quietly in Little Gidding and encountering something. You don't inform yourself or go and tell others, you just kneel. That is holiness. And it is Lovely. Beautiful.

Lovely, but not actually all that helpful. Eliot loved Little Gidding, others were not sure, Puritans smashed the place up during the Civil War. I was taken there as a student on a kind of pilgrimage. I have been back, more than once. I know about Little Gidding, I have given lectures about it, I think it is *interesting*, but have found it really *holy*.

You see holiness is tricky. It is hard. You have to work at it (Eliot does say that to be fair to him) and I think Nehemiah knew it too. We could all of us go to Little Gidding and one or two of you might have as special moment and most of you, like me, would be wondering where the nearest pub is. I have take groups of pilgrims to the Holy Land. I would say most of them went to Bethlehem, Nazareth and the tomb and thought they were *interesting*, but ask them when it felt *holy* and they would say it was sitting in silence in a boat on Lake Galilee. For most of us holiness is not a thing you do, or a place you go to, or a way of life - it is a feeling you get, it is listening to music, watching the sun set,, reading a poem. We have made holiness private, you have one holiness and I have another. She reads Sylvia Plath he sips good burgundy an they touch the hem of glory.

Nehemiah would have no time for that. Holiness, he was sure, is what we must be together, how we all live. He had a problem to solve and his answer was the answer we keep hearing 'us' and not 'them'. How can I be holy Nehemiah asked, the answer was to be like this and not like them. The answer was to for all holy people to be the same, and not like that

It is tough stuff this morning, you should probably go home and have a lie down. But, we do need to think about how we can be holy together. How do we answer the Nehemiah question, what walls do we build? To answer that question we should remember that Jesus told us to be a bit cautious about rules – *the sabbath was made for us, we were not made for the Sabbath*, he said. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He did not cut himself off, he did not insist on us being the same. We heard him in the synagogue, in the gospel, declaring freedom, healing, and inclusion.

This morning I think we should study Nehemiah and then be cautious. Look what crisis does. Nehemiah shows us that. He lived in crisis and so do we. Crisis makes rules and boundaries. Crisis divides; crisis likes the same and hates the other. Crisis trumps love.

Time to stop. I promised you the outback. We are celebrating Australia day that fascinating ancient and modern country that has to hold together some very different ideas about identity

and holiness. Ten years ago, I got friendly with Greg Thompson, the Bishop of the 'Top End' the vast Northern Territory. His diocese was six times bigger than Great Britain. Greg got to know some of the indigenous people of Australia. Now they have a profound sense of what is holy. They think the land is holy and so are people and so is memory. Their holiness gathers up animals, places, rocks trees, springs, ancestors and much more. Their holiness is in the wonderful songlines that connect and notice relation. Not much them and us there and no walls, they really don't like walls.

Nehemiah lived in adversity and stared down crisis. He had good reason to build those walls. Today I think we would do well to notice the temptations crisis brings, the temptations we suffer now as we divide and blame and demonise one another. We have to ask how can we be holy *together*. Not her with her Mozart, and me with my poems, and him with Jethro Tull, but how do we live in forgiveness and respect. Because we are failing and the walls are getting higher.