

Sermon 14.5.17

During the week, I gathered some photos of memorial plaques which tell us something about the time when a building was constructed, and who laid the foundation stone. But they don't tell us the whole story about how the building came to be erected. Usually one name is featured – but there would be many, many people who were part of the construction of the building. (Photos on screen of foundation stones and churches).

We are at an interesting part of the Nehemiah story - Chapter 3. On first reading, it doesn't seem very inspiring. Nehemiah takes us on a tour of the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, and there is a detailed list of about 70 names of people, as well as groups, places, and all the Gates of the city wall. When you hear the chapter read, think about why a chapter like this is included in the biblical narrative. What purpose does it have?

Nehemiah 3

Why is this chapter so detailed?

This part of the story could have been summarised in 2 or 3 sentences. To understand why this chapter – and many others like it, such as the genealogies, are included in the Bible – we have to recognise that the Hebrew people 'had a long and still-living tradition of taking history seriously as the arena in which God carries out his work of salvation. They believed that God was personally alive and active in the world, in their community, and in them. And none of this 'in general' or 'at large', but at particular times, in specific places, with named persons: history. That is why the biblical revelation is so profuse with names and dates, places and events.' (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*)

Nehemiah mentioned the work of so many people and groups: priests, construction supervisors, goldsmiths, manufacturers of perfume, city leaders, women, temple servants, gatekeepers, and merchants. These people had a place in their community, and were given a place in the vision that Nehemiah had of restoring not only the wall, but their tradition. Their family connections were named – sons, grandsons, daughters.

Specific places where people came from are named: town of Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon and Mizpah. Places in Jerusalem are mentioned: the tombs of King David's family, the pool of Siloam, a water reservoir, the House of the Warriors; and then all the Gates. Gates were needed in the wall because many roads converged at Jerusalem. Gates were required not only as defence against attack, but were hubs of activity. The city council would meet at the gate, and shopkeepers set up stalls for trade.

All the gates had a specific purpose. Nehemiah, in taking us on a tour around the city wall, starts and ends at the Sheep Gate, which was used to bring sheep into the temple for sacrifices. The Fish Gate had a fish market nearby. Through the Dung Gate, people carried garbage to be burned in a valley outside the city. Then there was the City Gate, the Valley Gate, Fountain Gate, Horse Gate, and East Gate.

There are some interesting features of this chapter:

- Nehemiah is not mentioned in this chapter. There is a man with the same name mentioned in verse 16, but it is a different person.
- We are told that some leaders refused to work with the construction supervisors. Their unwillingness is recorded.

- The priests were assigned repairs to the wall in front of their own house. Commentators suggest that they would be more motivated to build their part well, because they would want their home to be securely protected. It is possible that they engaged their family in the work as well. Nehemiah blended their self-interest with his overall objective.

Let's bring this story into our theme: Rebuilding a thriving church and neighbourhood.

This part of the Nehemiah story illustrates how God has made us as interdependent individuals. We are many members, but one in working together to accomplish God's purpose. Paul makes this point clear in 1 Corinthians 12. 'The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ. God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." All of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it.' (vv12, 18, 21, 27, *New Living Translation*)

Each part depends on the other parts in order for the whole body to function properly. When talking about church, how many of us say, 'I'm going to church this morning.' When we say that, we mean that we are going to the building that belongs to the church. It's a gathering place, a community centre, a facility for worship, and for all the projects and groups that meet here.

When we meet together on Sunday or during the week, we are the church gathered. Between gathering times, we are the church scattered. WE are the church. and we all have something to contribute to the life of the church and the world. Churches of Christ have always upheld the 'priesthood of all believers', meaning that there is no hierarchy of ministry or service. We are all ministers in our daily life. We will go through different seasons of involvement. It might be a season where we contribute our gifts to equip a congregation or group. Or it might be a season of family support, caring for someone who is ill, or who is elderly. It might be a season of intense work focus, maybe on a particular project.

God doesn't see our involvements as spiritual or secular. Because God is Spirit, and his presence is all-encompassing, it is all spiritual. The Psalmist says, 'I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!' (Psalm 139: 7) God is not locked up in a building. Rebuilding a thriving church and neighbourhood is not limited to what happens in the daily work that takes place in these buildings.

When Jesus sent his disciples out, they were to say to people with whom they stayed, or healed – 'The Kingdom of God is near you now.' (Luke 10: 5,7,9) The Kingdom of God means life lived according to God's way, or God's reign or rule.

Think about what you have done in the past week – the places where you have been, the people you have been with, the work you've done. Did you have an awareness of God in your daily interactions during the week? I'm going to encourage you to pray each day this week, asking God to help you plant seeds of faith, and kindness and compassion. Ask him to help you listen – to people, to the places where you are, and to the quiet voice of the Spirit prompting you to take notice of what's happening around you. Be engaged with where you are. Have a faithful presence. You don't have to speak spiritual language. The best communication is to be yourself. When we all do that, that's being the church.

A lot of ministry is offered here in this community centre during the week. Some of us don't live in this local area, so we can't do a lot about this particular neighbourhood. But we can take responsibility for exercising faithful presence where we are. A lot of ministry can be offered by you in Williamstown, Bundoora, Fitzroy, Pascoe Vale, Ivanhoe, Reservoir, Heidelberg – and on it goes. It's the church in action.

In Nehemiah's story, each person was vital. Nehemiah was not a solo leader – he recruited workers who became involved. The focus was not the end product, but doing something significant together.

God meets us in the everyday happenings of our daily lives

During the week, I met with Brad and Colleen Coath, who are Urban Neighbours of Hope workers in Broadmeadows. They have been renting a home for several years on very busy Camp Road. They are excited because they have just bought a home in Broadmeadows. It's not a suburb that features on the list of high-status places to live. It's one of the most culturally diverse areas in Melbourne. They take neighbourhood seriously, and God's call to them to be urban missionaries – having a Christian presence at the Immigration Detention Centre nearby, the local school where their boys attend, the junior footy team that Brad coaches, the language classes that Colleen teaches. They're sowing seeds. Where they are, so is the Kingdom of God. Where you are, so is the Kingdom of God.

Simon Carey Holt is minister at Collins St. Baptist in the city, where he lives with his family. He has written this book, *God Next Door, Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*. There is a lot of good theology and mission practice in this book.

'When Jesus bids us, 'Come, follow me!' he calls us into particular places, places that we can see, walk, smell and inhabit. The story of the incarnation is the story of God en-fleshed in a particular place at a particular time and within a very specific community. So too for us, the call of God is to be in a particular place and there to embody the presence and grace of God. It's a call to the neighbourhood.' (p77)

'Mission is a way of living, a way of being in the world. The most authentic expressions of mission arise out of who we are. The call to mission is a call to be fully present where we are, proclaiming and embodying the good news of Jesus in our most immediate contexts.' (p82)

Some of you will be called to invest your commitment and service to the people who are part of our community activities during the week - that is the church. Some of you will be called to invest in this neighbourhood and community by being engaged with what happens locally - that is the church. We are all called to take seriously our investment in the places wherever we live and work and have our being - that is the church.

And when we come together, we bring all of our experiences into the presence of God with one another – as an offering to God of ourselves, in worship and in prayer – that too is the church. Be encouraged and strengthened as you go into this week – and know that God has called you into particular places to be the expression of his heart for people. Where you are, so is the Kingdom of God.

Sources:

Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door, Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*