**Beyond Nehemiah**

We’ve had a fantastic series on Nehemiah. But what happened next? The project that Ezra and Nehemiah started seemed to fail. So, we have to ask, “Does God really work in history?”

And like Nehemiah, we also live in turbulent and seemingly vulnerable times. So, we also have to ask, like the Israelites did back then, “How should we live in times such as these? Where can we find peace and hope when the news seems so threatening?”

The story of Nehemiah ends in around 450 BC. The prophet Malachi spoke a little later in 430 BC. And from his prophetic words we can see that things were already beginning to go wrong. And then, after Malachi, the Bible goes silent for 400 years.

What was God doing for those 400 years between Malachi and the time of Jesus? To answer that question for back then, as we still need to do for today, we have to look at the long sweep of history.

In Israel, we do know that some kept the faith. Look, for example, at Mary the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. There’s no doubting the quality of their faith.

But we also know that the presence of God did not fully return to the Temple. Why not?

In Matthew 13, Jesus shares the parable of the wheat and the weeds. God sows wheat. But, right after that, the enemy then sows weeds. By the time of Jesus, we can see that the weeds that had been sown in Israel had become disastrous.

* Some Israelites had misunderstood their call to holiness as instead a call to separation, whilst others had given in to assimilation in order to maintain their social standing.
* Their big sin had become not a failure to keep the law, as we often think today. It had become, instead, religious and ethnic pride and theological rigidity.
* They’d missed their calling to be a light to the Gentiles.
* They hadn’t wanted to hear Isaiah’s message about the suffering servant.
* They’d kept on looking backwards, wanting to rebuild their former glory days of David and Solomon. Times of cultural ascendancy, military strength and economic power.
* They hadn’t learnt the lesson that the prophet Jeremiah had given them as to why they’d been sent into exile in Babylon in the first place. They hadn’t started practicing Jubilee, the economic system designed to prevent economic exploitation.

How many of these things might be true of us today?

Over those 400 years, what built up, alongside the brutality of the Romans, was a crescendo of evil, ready to crush Jesus when he came with a different narrative. What the enemy intended for evil, God used for good.

But what was happening beyond Israel?

God was preparing Europe for the Gospel.

* The Greeks and the Romans were creating an empire of open travel and communication throughout the Mediterranean.
* A philosophical culture was arising that was very different to the animistic culture present almost everywhere else. This classical culture celebrated reason and virtue, with a recognition that it’s these qualities that lead to what we’d now call human flourishing and the common good. In other words, a culture very receptive to the Gospel. Jesus, the Logos, a man of virtue showing humankind how to live as fully human and in solidarity with others. It’s no accident that Thomas Acquinas, by adding faith, hope and love, was able to complete and perfect the classical virtues of Aristotle. Nor that the Early Church Fathers lent heavily on their classical education in working out the complex theology of the Trinity.
* And because of the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, Jewish synagogues started being established throughout the Mediterranean world, including in Greece, Rome, Alexandria and Asia Minor. Many of these became the launch pads for the growth of Christianity.

So yes, God does work in history. But over long time periods. And not always in plain sight. His Kingdom is not of this world.

Just after Pentecost, there were a few thousand Christians. By AD 100 there were perhaps a million. There are now 2.4 billion.

We haven’t been looking at Nehemiah just for a history lesson. Like Nehemiah, we live in turbulent times.

I don’t want to be either pessimistic or optimistic. I want to be realistic. And it seems to me that it would be unrealistic to expect this turbulence to end any time soon. What is unusual about our world today is that, because of technologically charged globalisation, the many troubles around us interlace and amplify each other in a way not previously experienced in history.

Just as concerning as these global events, is what is happening within our own culture. Since the advent of post-modernity, the idea of objective reality has been under attack. If a society doesn’t know what is true, or indeed doesn’t believe that there is such a thing as truth, it cannot build a future. It’s like a sandcastle in the face of an incoming tide.

I imagine the Israelites, at the time of Nehemiah, had their fair share of anxiety and fear. As Christians, how are we going to cope with a world that also looks increasingly chaotic?

Let me share a couple of stories.

As you know, I’m chairman of Medair, a global humanitarian aid charity. We have, for the last two months, been having our own time of turmoil. The US used to provide 40% of the world’s humanitarian and development aid. But on 24th January the US effectively brought that to an end. The phrase volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous might have been invented just for us. We’ve had to ask ourselves some tough questions. Will we survive? How are we going to respond? Which lives can we no longer save? Perhaps in other words, “Where is God?”

Things are now improving for us, and I don’t tell that story to invoke sympathy. But rather to use it as an illustration of some of the challenges we all face and, as we’ll see in a minute, to suggest some of the solutions.

My second story is more uplifting. As you may know, the Royal family owns a beautiful countryside estate in Norfolk called Sandringham. Quite a few years ago I was invited to spend the day there with Prince Philip, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II, who was also going to join us for lunch. Of course, I smartened myself up and was on my best behaviour. It was such a marvellous day that, when I got home, I wrote myself a note of everything that had happened so I’d never forget.

What I want to emphasise is that all of us have been invited, not just to spend a day with the king and queen of England, but to spend every day for the rest of our lives with the King of Kings. How much more thrilling is that?

Will we accept the invitation, and the change of life and outlook which that entails?

In a time of turbulence, we can’t let the world control our minds and therefore our actions. Because that leads to fear and impotence.

We can instead trust that the Spirit of God lives within us, and lead a life of hope, joy and right action.

I promise you that it’s possible to rise above the troubles of today.

As Laurence said last week, our faith is no longer ‘outside in’ as it was in Old Testament times. Because of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, our faith is now ‘inside out’. And that makes all the difference.

A couple of weeks ago, I met with the woman who leads the work for Medair in a troubled country. Bombs had been falling around her. Colleagues of hers had lost members of their family. People were being assassinated outside in the street where she lived. And she was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of refugees, who she was supposed to be helping.

She had recognised five things. She couldn’t control the situation. She didn’t know what would happen tomorrow. Nowhere was safe. She couldn’t protect her team. And the things she loved were being destroyed.

However, she knew the truth of Psalm 34. Not that everything will be okay but,

“I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me.

He freed me from all my fears.

Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy.”

And this is what she shared about the situation where she worked,

“In the chaos, we can bring clarity.

In the uncertainty, we can take action.

Where it’s unsafe, we can find peace.

Despite the loss, we can live generously.

And amidst the destruction, we can create beauty.”

If that’s true for her in those terrible circumstances, it can surely be true for us. It is possible to hold both lament and hope in our heart at the same time.

So how do we get to this point, where we are living by the Spirit and not by the news cycle?

First, we have to resist a number of temptations. To be a spectacular individual who transforms the world. To believe that the world is transformed by political power. To exclude God from the equation of how the world is changed.

I’m not saying don’t be strong, or don’t be involved, or don’t work hard. I am saying these three temptations were the ones Jesus resisted in the desert.

The Gospels give us two stories of the disciples and Jesus on Lake Galilee. In one, the disciples are terrified in a fierce storm. In the other, Peter walks on water with Jesus.

That’s the choice we have. Live tied to the troubles of the earth, or rise above them like an eagle.

How do we do this? May I share six steps that I’ve found helpful. And I’m taking for granted here that we’re doing what we should in terms of prayer, Bible study and fellowship. Those are the absolute basics.

*Thankfulness*

We need to stop judging and complaining. Instead, we need to start giving thanks for all of our spiritual and material blessings. Thankfulness is the gateway to worship and joy. Criticism is the trap door to fear.

It’s not easy to stop grumbling. I know, I’ve tried. It’s not easy because in Britain it’s often how we make conversation. But thankfulness is like a step up onto a platform where everything else becomes possible. It changes your perspective on everything. Let’s go on a grumble fast for the time between now and Easter.

*Spiritual reality*

We need to understand the depth to which God sustains everything and is involved with everything. He’s not a remote watchmaker who created the world and then stepped back to see it run.

I’ve come to see and believe that there’s no difference between the natural and the supernatural. Everything is a miracle sustained by God‘s pleasure.

*Physical reality*

We need to be less naive. A generation of peace has lulled us into a false sense of security, and our liberalism has fooled us into thinking that the rest of the world is reasonable.

But bad things happen, here and abroad. People can and do commit acts of evil. We need to stop being surprised by this.

Not everything that happens is caused by God. And if we have a theology that tells us that God does cause everything, then we need to admit that the mental gymnastics this requires of us is not sustainable. God does not promise us a trouble free life. He promises instead to be present with us through our troubles.

We often misunderstand Romans 8.28 as telling us that God works out everything for our good. He often does, but NT Wright has quite a different translation of that verse. He says what it means, in effect, is that God gives us an opportunity to do good in every circumstance. That’s a very different meaning.

*Hope*

On a personal level, nothing can separate us from the love of God. We need to keep troubles, and even death itself, in perspective.

Some years ago, God gave me what I might call a visitation. He showed me my life after death. And it was good. Once you have conquered the fear of death, everything else in this life falls into the right perspective. If you don’t fear death, you don’t fear anything. We can trust God’s promise of eternal life.

On a global level, in the end God wins. In fact, he’s already won. We can trust God to work things out according to his timetable, not ours.

*Patience*

The story is not about me. We need to adjust our time scales to give God time to work out his purposes. And this may be well beyond our own lifetimes.

When I was working in the City, I became desperate to see change. But one day God challenged me. He asked me whether I was prepared to die having seen nothing change. I needed to think about that for a bit, but eventually I said yes. It was immensely freeing. And then of course God did change things!

*Action*

We need to take responsibility. We’re not saved so that we can go to heaven. We’re saved for a purpose. We’re saved because God has something for us to do. And that’s something is to love God and to love our neighbour. It’s not complicated.

Loving our neighbour might be just sharing a cup of tea with our neighbour. Or it might be serving as the Prime Minister of a country.

I often think of the example that Bonhoeffer gives in his book Ethics. He says the love of a Christian doctor causes him not only to look after his patients, but also to care for the system of medicine of which he’s part. What are the institutions and systems of which you’re part? Improving these can also be what it means to love your neighbour.

Please be reassured that God works through our faithfulness, not our moral perfection. I’m not saying that sin doesn’t matter. But I sometimes think that we’re more bothered by our sin than God is. God works through imperfect people just like you and me.

We are now saved. And on one level that is extraordinary. But our ongoing personal sanctification, and our reward in heaven, depend on us matching our deeds to our beliefs. It’s also extraordinary, but true, that the whole of creation is waiting for us to step up and fulfil our God given mandate. God has chosen to change the world through us.

We have agency. Like the death of Christ on the cross, the impact of what we do may at first look like nothingness or even failure. But in reality, what we do reverberates both in this life and in the life to come.

Let’s stop worrying about what loving our neighbour means for everyone else, and just concentrate on ourselves. Let’s run well in the lane in which God has put us. Ask him what that means for you in your season of life.

So, with the help of God, will you join me

* in not grumbling or complaining, but in giving thanks instead
* in looking for God everywhere,
* in seeing troubles as an opportunity to learn and bless others,
* in putting aside my definition of success to do instead what God calls me to do even if I see no result,
* in trusting that God has got this,
* in doing everything as though working for God

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