

### **Sermon 24<sup>th</sup> January PDS Epiphany 3 year C**

We don't often hear from Nehemiah, he was one of the Jews taken into exile, and who despite working for the King was given permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild it, this was the third attempt. It is difficult but in some ways it is easier than what comes next which is rebuilding the people of God. The people who are gathered there are a very mixed bunch; some are the dregs of society who were deemed not to be worth taking into exile, some are Jews who have chosen to return many of whom are wealthy and independent. Some have continued to worship God as best they can, others have married outside of the faith, some have lost sight of God completely.

So, how can this mix of people be brought together to become a people worthy of God and his holy city again? Enter Ezra, a priest, scribe and leader, who had arrived in Jerusalem with the second group to return from exile, he was a great man of God, humble and obedient. He wept for God's people, he prayed, he repented

and he believed that God would fulfil his promise.

Both Ezra's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and Nehemiah's met with opposition, but prayer, obedience to God and perseverance won out. Ezra and Nehemiah were very different people but God used them both. After the wall was rebuilt Ezra read the law to the people which brought about national repentance and reform. The walls were rebuilt but the work wasn't complete until people rebuilt their lives spiritually. Ezra instructed the people in God's word, and as they listened they recognised the sin in their lives, admitted it and took steps to remove it.

The people of Jerusalem had to learn again about God and how to live together as a people of God. It is a communal event, they stand together for hours as Ezra reads, trained people move amongst them to ensure they understand the implications of what was being said, which comes down to the two points of feeding the poor and worshipping God.

The reading from Corinthians is also about building a new people. A people who work together, who don't want to be the most important, or don't want to impose their views on others, but accept that everyone has an equal place, an equal point of view in the body of God. Unfortunately despite all of the biblical teaching about how to live as a people of God we are still not very good at it. Splits, dissensions, and hurt abound in churches. It is often difficult to persuade people to feed the poor and trust in God for their own church's provision.

Ezra and Nehemiah were two very different people but by listening to God through prayer, and by obedience led a group of people with very different lives, histories and circumstances to a communal act of repentance. And from there growth as a people of God.

Everyone has a gift to use to build up the body of Christ, it is spiritual pride to think that our particular gift is superior to others, it is pride that thinks our voice should be heard above

others, our sole aim should be to work together to build up the people of God. A community arguing amongst itself is not attractive, nor does it show the way that Jesus tells us to live. The reading from Luke follows the temptation of Christ in the desert, the devil was beaten but Jesus came up against Satan many more times in his ministry. Is there an area in our lives that we are being tempted in? An area of our church life that needs attention because the devil is there?

We are all baptised by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, our belief in God unites us, by the way we lead our lives others will know we are Christians. In Luke Jesus talks about his mission as doing God's justice and creating God's community.

These are the common themes of the readings. Nehemiah take us back to the basics of hearing God's word, repenting of sins and moving forward as the people of God. Paul writes about the need for difference and the need for respect of those differences; as each gift is

important to the whole so that a new community can be built whose life and health is dependent on each other and God. As for Jesus, his whole life inspires us as a model of prayer, obedience and living life with and for others.