

Sunday 5th June 2022
Nehemiah 6:15-16 & 7:73b-8:18
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Sermon keypoints:

- Restoration is a people living under the Word of God
- Living under the Word of God requires us to respond wholeheartedly
- Living under the Word of God requires us to be reshaped

I don't think we need to pray anymore after such a beautiful prayer led for us by the Choir. So, let me let me begin.

Recently, I was at the General Assembly and for five days, long days, we heard 30 reports which totaled something like 260 pages plus of writing, not that they read it verbatim, thankfully, but they spoke, in addition to those 250 pages, there were about 400 people in The Assembly Hall which you see pictured here, 200 online and probably the cost, I guess, is somewhere in the region of maybe 120 to 150 thousand pounds.

And so, you might begin to wonder - what did it achieve? Because, you know, your offerings contributed to funding that, a bit of your offering goes into the central funds and some of it is used for that to. So, what did it achieve? What came of it? Or is the church any more on a path towards a good future? Or, as we're thinking about in Nehemiah, are we on a path to restoration?

I guess that depends on your point of view. For example, there were positives. There was the agreement and ratification of the Declaration of Friendship, the Saint Margaret Declaration between the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church of Scotland taking a stand against bigotry and saying it has no place and should not be condoned by anyone of faith. There were encouraging reports of the work done by the Scottish Bible Society, by Crossreach, by The Guild and all that they are doing in the name of Jesus and for people locally and internationally. Great reports to hear, great work to affirm and encourage. There were negatives. The church made headlines about some of its decisions in the press and which I would argue is a departure from Scripture. So, as our church on the path to restoration, for me personally, for a number of people who attended, even across the theological spectrum, it didn't feel like it, I didn't feel like we were necessarily better off for having spent so much money and gathered for five days and expelled so much hot air.

But, I guess, ultimately, it begs the question - What would restoration look like? What would restoration look like for the church, in the everyday?

Well, we're nearly at the end of our series in Nehemiah and, halfway through we read these verses, just a moment ago, 'So the wall was completed in 52 days and when our enemies heard about this all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their confidence because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.' The wall is complete. The wall is complete and not only that, people are taking notice, they're taking notice of God's people and they are realizing that God is alive and active, that He's not just some old guy in a book, He's alive and active and the wall is complete. In our day, if people started thinking that about the church and about the Christian faith, we'd maybe think 'Well, job done. Pat in the back.' That would be a great

accomplishment. If the wider nations, if even our own nation, were taking note of this. But the job is not complete for Nehemiah because they're only, we are only halfway through the book. There's still another seven chapters, and don't worry we're not going to read them all, because many of the chapters that are coming follow on from what is contained in this chapter, although they deal with different issues. Their themes, their principles apply, follow the lead of this chapter. Chapter eight, there's still seven more to go and it all goes to show, as we said a few weeks ago, that the rebuilding is not about the building. The wall might be complete, but God's restoration is not over, it's not done, the job's not finished, because the restoration that God is seeking the restoration that is upon Nehemiah's heart, because of God's prompting and the restoration that God is enabling is a spiritual restoration, the restoration of their spiritual life and it's all tied in with God's word.

And so, we read 'All the people came together they told Israel, the Teacher of the Law, to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So, on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra, the priest, brought the law before the assembly. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. The goal of restoration is not the rebuilding of a building, it's to have a people who live under the Word of God. The goal of restoration is to have a people who live under the Word of God and the people seek this out. They invite Ezra to do it. To speak to them from daybreak till noon. Be glad you've only got a 30 minute sermon, if it ends up being there, and they raise Ezra up on a platform so that everyone can hear, the multitude can hear, because it's so important for them. Why is it so important for them? Are they just being religious?

Well, let's remember that back in chapter 2 they felt a measure of disgrace, disgrace that the walls had been, were in ruin but that spoke of other spiritual dynamics and that disgrace was being then projected onto God because the nations would hold God in disdain, with lack of honor and they'd had enough, they'd had enough, they wanted to be a people who brought honor and glory to God's name, rather than disgrace, and to know how to do that, to know the wider life that they had to live to bring honor and glory to God. How to please God they turned to His Word. They turned to His Word. So, as we seek and pray for restoration of our own congregation, to see these pews filled, to see such a number here that we have to cram us unto the balcony, to see our denomination flourish again that we plant churches rather than having to close churches. Is it this kind of restoration that we seek? To be a people, to be a church who live under the Word of God?

I guess it depends on what you think the purpose of the church is, what our focus should be. If it's just about doing good in the community, maybe not if it's just about caring for one another. You don't necessarily need to be a community that lives under the Word of God to do that. Yet, our elders agreed that as a congregation this would be our purpose - To seek to invite encourage and enable people of all ages to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus. And that means a lot more than just knowing the stories about Jesus and thinking He's a great guy. To follow Jesus is to grow in the character of Jesus. To follow Jesus is to know the ways of Jesus across both the Old and the New Testaments

and put that into practice. To follow Jesus is to say that Jesus is worth following, that he's worth glory, he's worth our lives.

So, what is it that we are seeking the restoration of? Is it this, to be a people who live under the word of God?

Now, even if we think it's important to be a people who live under the Word of God it begs the question again - What does that look like? What does it mean? Because we have our own traditions, where we seek to honor the Word of God, don't we? We bring in the Bible every week during a moment of stillness and we place it on the pulpit and in other churches, as you saw last week with Slamannan, they may be sing a song, other churches are silent, some churches stand. Some churches have a monstrosity of a Bible that's just big and it's old and there's a degree of reverence with that.

But it's possible that the tradition, the ritual can be become the end in itself, that we have this public display of reverence for God's Word but it doesn't mean anything now, because we don't live it out. So, what does it mean to live under the Word of God, more than just having some public display of reverence on a Sunday morning? What does that look like?

Well, the people of Nehemiah's day give us some ideas. 'Ezra opened the book and, as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God and all the people lifted their hands and responded Amen! Amen! Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. All the people had been weeping as they listened to the Words of the Law. Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.' We see here that to live under the Word of God is to respond to the Word of God, to respond with the whole of our hearts. And so, we see that they raise their hands in worship and praise. If you think I'm crazy doing that then, well, I've got Ezra on my side. So, they lift their hands in praise but they also bow down in worship as an act of humility and they say Amen! Amen! And if you don't know what that word means, it means 'may it be so', 'let it be' so, 'I agree', 'I want that to be true of my life', 'True in this world', 'True of us' depending on what you're saying 'Amen' too. But they also weep and they mourn, a sign of repentance, but then they also go home to celebrate and rejoice together with a feast. The people in Nehemiah's time, in this passage at least, they respond wholeheartedly to the Word of God. And so, we can have as many rituals as we like, we can have bookcases full of Bibles at home, we can even be reading the Bible every day but, if we are not responding to the Word of God, then we are not living under the Word of God, because James reminds us 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says.'

It's possible to deceive ourselves, to think that because we give due reverence to the Scriptures, to think that because I was there for the sermon and I even listened, I didn't fall asleep, we can think that we are ticking the box, that we're listening but, to listen to the Word, is to do the work and I think that's, in part why, for some in the church, the decision at the General Assembly on that particular Monday was so disheartening

because it didn't feel like we were responding to the Word of God. It felt like we were responding to other things, other pressures, other voices but not to God's Word. But it's easy to point fingers at others, to look at the others and point those things out. What about our own lives? What about your life? Where are we deceiving ourselves? Or, to put it more positively, where are we responding to the Word of God? Where are we responding in praise and celebration? Where are we responding with confession and humility? Where are we responding with our own 'Amen'? So, let me give you a few examples from recent sermons.

At the beginning of Nehemiah there was a call to pray, to pray for our congregation, to pray for our Sunday gathering, to pray for our wider denomination, and it's been heartening to see a fair number of folk gather at 10:15. Now, I said at the time, there's no pressure to be there, but if you don't come please pray in your own time. So, did you pray? Because I haven't seen all of you here. Did you pray? Did you take that on board? Did you care enough to pray? Or did we just listen but not listen? Because this is not going to change without listening to the Word of God and without prayer. So, we're going to carry on our 10:15 prayers, we're going to move it into one of the other rooms and you're always welcome to join us and you can continue to pray at home, but sometimes we need the structure, we need the accountability to make us stop and pray and I need that as much as anyone. If we didn't have that 10:15 time just ask Jean Meek the number of times when I have been busy and about and then Jean's commented 'We praying?' I was like 'Yeah, we're praying! Great, you've reminded me, it's that time already.' I need it as much as the next person. So maybe you need it and maybe you should come at 10:15. Or if not, put it in the diary and keep to do something to respond to that. Or let me jump back into our Lent series. Our Lent series where we saw the invitation of Jesus to trust Him, to trust Him because He knows our sorrows and He has come, He has overcome death. Have we taken that to heart? Is it the foundation of our faith in some way? Because hard times come, sadness has come, dark times come, and you might be there just now, and if we don't take that Word to heart, if we don't take it deep down, then when those hard times come, we forget those truths and we think that God doesn't care and He's not there and He's just leaving us to our fate or our darkness. But He's not, He's not. He's come to die on a cross, to overcome death that we might have a better future, that we might have the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation where there'll be no more suffering and no more pain and the old order of things will have gone away.

Did we take that to heart? Did we allow that to go deep down in us and engender a deeper trust in Jesus? Friends, the purpose of restoration is to be a people who respond to the Word of God because that's in part what it looks like to live under the Word of God. But our passage gives us one more, one more area where what it looks like to live under the Word of God.

We read earlier 'They found written in the law that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month so the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters.' To live under the Word of God is to be reshaped or transformed by the Word of God. Imagine, they've got

these new homes that they've just rebuilt and they're getting all comfy and then they discover they have to make temporary shelters out of branches and live outdoors for seven days. Can you imagine doing that? It'd be a measure of discomfort, frustration. 'Really? I've really got to do this?' But they do it because to live under the Word of God is to be shaped, reshaped by the Word of God. And so, what they're celebrating here is the Festival of Tabernacles. It's written about in the Book of Leviticus and they would make these temporary shelters and by sharing in this festival they would remember a number of things. They would remember that God had guided His people through the desert for 40 years and that He had provided and protected them, that He had been faithful and generous but they'd also remember then that they were indebted to that past action of God and to the present generosity and faithfulness of God that had helped them rebuild Jerusalem now, and they would be saying that they're still a pilgrim people, they're still a people on a journey, they're still not fully at home yet, that there's more to come and so they trust the Lord, they put their trust in Jesus.

And friends, today as we gather around this table and we take our little cups and we share in the Sacrament of Communion, many of these things are being remembered and celebrated too. We're remembering the provision and protection of God. That He 'so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son'. That's what we remember, that we're saved, we don't have to pay the penalty of our sin, because our God is faithful and generous and so we remember that, we remember that we're indebted to Him, we remember that this isn't our home, that there's a better future, a new creation, a new home where we'll see Jesus' face to face and we'll be reunited with all our loved ones who followed Him.

And so, we declare our confidence, our ongoing trust in Jesus too, as we share in this meal. Now, for the Israelites, in their minds eye, that was a timely reminder they'd forgotten about it, they hadn't celebrated it in that way, there was new things to learn about this festival, it was a timely thing of God and I want to tell you that God has been doing a timely thing I think in giving us this sermon at this time, in light of what the Kirk Session has been discussing about communion too. So, back in March the elders began a conversation around communion, about how communion is served, about who gets to share in communion and if you don't know our past practice before the pandemic, was that the elders would walk in and sit over here and then, the elders, after the top table was, top table the table was served, we would then serve the elders and then the elders would serve everybody else, and there were probably very practical reasons for that in some ways. It makes it quicker and simpler less messy. But as the elders shared about this, we began to share that we felt maybe at times it could inadvertently communicate things that we don't want to communicate. It could communicate a measure of superiority, that those in leadership, those who oversee this community of faith, they're served first. Well, why?

And it's not to criticize, it's just to say that that could be portrayed, that could be seen in that symbolism and so we paused the conversation and went away to kind of ruminate a bit more and think about it over. And we came back in May and in that meeting we talked about it more and collectively we decided that we should change our practice, we

should change it so that Communion can be served by anybody within the congregation and that the order of it might change as well of who is served first and last and it feels like a rediscovery, feels like a restoration, kind of akin to Nehemiah's time, that we're discovering that there's much more to how we share and that when we share it in different ways we can recover different meanings and symbolism.

So, that's coming once we're able to start sharing the elements again and pass them around. Maybe for September but at the same meetings we also talked about the place of children and whether children could share in communion. Now this is not the first time that the Kirk Session of Brightons has had this discussion. Apparently, we had a discussion about it back in the 90s. I wasn't here for that one so I don't know all the ins and outs but I'm told the decision was made that children could share in Communion That's nearly 30 years on - nothing has changed really. I think our elders couldn't really name any changes that had really resulted from that decision, in that discussion.

So, we are now going to more proactively involve children in sharing Communion but the elders would like me to do some teaching on that, to us as a congregation and then do some follow-up work with the Sunday School leaders, with the Sunday Schools, maybe with families, and to allow that time, we're working towards December as being the first time that we might more proactively involve our children in Communion, and it will mean that children are in here for Communion not every time, there are different ways of doing this, but at least in December, our kids will be back in the Sanctuary after the sermon to share in Communion. More change is coming, and before you think that this is about being more inclusive or something like this, I am not going to ground any of my arguments in favor of that, on being more inclusive, I am going to ground all my arguments upon the Scriptures and can I tell you I have been loving the reading I've been doing recently just to reacquaint myself with some of this. It's getting me excited about God's purposes about His heart for children, for families and what we've been missing out on as a church and how we disciple our children and how we talk about faith with our children. I'm excited. I'm really looking forward to that teaching series which will come at the end of August beginning, beginning of September. So, it's all going to be shaped by Scripture and then proactively responding to that.

But, for today, in a few moments, we're going to be sharing in Communion. We do it responding to the Word of God, the command of Jesus in Scripture, the written Word of God and to the life of Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, who came in flesh and died on a cross for you and for me. We remember in that meal. His generosity and faithfulness. We affirm that we are people who seek to follow Jesus by living under the Word of God, responding wholeheartedly and being shaped, reshaped as His people. I pray it may be so. Amen.