

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2022**  
**Nehemiah 5:1-14**  
**Rev.Melville Crosthwaite**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- Presence – God's presence and our presence
- Problem - not all are treated equal
- Politicians – not recognising/admitting responsibility
- Plan - preoccupation

Well, my goodness, wherever I look in this church musicians pop up from left and right. You are truly blessed. Thank-you.

Now, time is getting on, we've had a wee bit extra this morning so, I'm going to put this to the vote. If you want the shorter version of the sermon or the longer version of the sermon. For the shorter version raise your hands. The longer version.

Sorry, you've lost out.

Once upon a time there was a young teacher. His mum had just died. The family home was broken up. He had to find a new house near his work and began his first teaching job. All within the space of four weeks. He had never felt more alone. So, not knowing anybody, his neighbors or colleagues at work, just to hear the sound of another human voice in the house he bought a small portable, black and white TV. It was a long time ago. Because he'd not had his first installment of the salary, he bought it on higher purchase. It was a very long time ago! But, having paid it off nine months later, he realized that it cost nearly 20 percent more than its original cost price and so, he never again bought anything until he saved for it.

When someone is lonely, has little or no prospect of work, debts pile up, considered choices often go out of the window and, since the pandemic and now, with a frightening rise in living costs as Rachel referred to in the prayer, many more are having to choose between feeding their families or heating their homes. Because we live in a fallen world there are always unscrupulous people who are ready to take advantage of those who are struggling.

But the people of Israel returned from exile in Babylon to their crumbling city of Jerusalem, found themselves in not a dissimilar situation. If you picture the scenes for example of the devastation in Ukraine, from the places where Russian troops have now withdrawn, you will have a picture of something like the ruins of Jerusalem to which many of those who'd been in exile in Babylon had returned to their homeland in their city.

That was the experience of the people of God in Nehemiah's day, and their leaders were so preoccupied with the rebuilding of the city walls that they hadn't really noticed the growing crisis around them. So, what relevance does this have for us in the 21st century church today?

Well, the answer is plenty, and it's all to do with **presence**, which is the title of my sermon this morning. God's presence and our presence.

But let's first go to Nehemiah who emerged of, who emerged as the leaders of those trying to rebuild their lives and first of all consider the huge **problem** that he faced.

Now Ann read to us in the first verse of Nehemiah chapter five 'Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying 'we and our sons and daughters are numerous in order for us to eat and stay alive we must get grain.'

Please note the mention of wives and daughters, a sure sign that whole families were actually starving. And you can guarantee that the women came off worst.

We've just heard from the gender-based violence team some of the things that they're planning. Now, whilst there were many loving men amongst the Jewish people and the Jewish law did try to protect the position of women and children nevertheless, in biblical times, women were very much second-class citizens. In fact, even in Jewish law both women and children were seen more as possessions than people. Now, that seems shocking to us today, but that is a historical fact.

But, by contrast, if you move forward a few thousand years to the time of Jesus and His disciples, you will find that amongst His closest followers there were a group of women as well as the 12 recognized disciples. And so, following Jesus' example, it is our responsibility as His 21st century followers to ensure that all are equal before God, regardless of gender, regardless of age.

Now, I could of course go on to say you need to read 'Men are from Mars and women are from Venus' to say that there are differences between men and women and, if you doubt me, just ask a man who is a husband if his wife looks nice in something from the fat wardrobe or something from the thin wardrobe, and you'll know a man who doesn't know what to say whereas a woman would always know.

But, to be more serious, back to Nehemiah, why were some starving? Why was the position of women so difficult?

Well, Ann read to us in verses four and five 'Others were saying 'we are mortgaging our fields our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine' and still others were saying 'we have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax' that's to the emperor in the the Babylonian empire which had been taken over by the Persians 'and pay the kings tax on our fields and vineyards.'

Now, the passage goes on to explain that these struggling families were being forced to sell their children into slavery. Jewish law did permit that after a debt had been owed for more than six years the debtor or members of his family could be sold as slaves for a time in order for the debt to be paid, but then they could be bought back in the year of

jubilee. But it's clear from this passage that a great deal of mistreatment and rule bending and law bending had been going on.

Of course, nothing like that would ever happen in the Church of Scotland today, would it? Wouldn't it?

Years ago, when I was training, I did a placement with a minister whom, well let us say, I found it hard to like, there was something about him. I and the student deaconess who was also on placement, were invited to the mans for Sunday lunch after the service and both of us noticed that his wife, her hands were trembling as she was serving us at the table and then, instructed by her husband, to pour some orange juice as she trembled, she spilt it all over the table. 'Clean that up!' he hissed. If looks could kill, she would have dropped dead at that very moment.

I was horrified, absolutely horrified, and so was my fellow student and we talked about it afterwards and well, in our naivety, I think we probably concluded he was just a bit of a bully, but looking back, I'm pretty certain that something more sinister was going on.

If anyone here is experiencing that kind of treatment at home, anyone watching online or if you know anyone or even if you're scared, as Angela was saying about walking along the streets, please speak to Scott or another member of the gender-based violence team. Please do not suffer in silence.

But back to Nehemiah.

What did he and the other leaders do about the injustice that was experienced by ordinary people? What about, secondly, the politicians?

When Nehemiah heard about all of this he was angry but then as Ann read 'calling a large meeting to challenge his fellow leaders. He confronted them about their use of charging interest at unfair rates' The older versions of the NIV used the word 'usury' - I had to go and look that up in the dictionary actually, but it's charging interest at an unfair rate. What was the reaction of the politicians and read in verse 8 'they kept quiet because they could find nothing to say' because they knew they were guilty. Would that be some of today's politicians? Would say nothing rather than try and justify wrong actions only to dig a bigger hole for themselves?

But by contrast Nehemiah didn't shirk the truth but he realized that being by so concerned with the rebuilding of the city wall in some ways he was complicit in the injustice because he had not noticed what was happening, and that is the difference that having the presence of God can have in the life of a politician or a leader. Now, we all know that our Queen will be celebrates or is celebrating her platinum jubilee. She is a constitutional monarch not a politician, but her integrity, which stems from her faith in Jesus, has shone through her entire life.

Now, I don't know if you're a republican or not, I'm not going into that. I'm not, by the way, nail my colors to the mast. But what a contrast our queen presents to some of our leading politicians, because of the presence of God in her life.

In today's western culture, we have a what we call a 'culture of blame'. We blame the politicians, we blame the media, we blame the people out there, everybody but ourselves. Conveniently forgetting that well, as well as rights, all of us have responsibilities. We all need to play our part, we all need to be the presence of God, not just the politicians.

But, as a leader, Nehemiah played his part, He came up with thirdly, a **plan**. He ensured that not just the other leaders but all those in positions of financial power gave back straight away, ordinary people's property along with the unfair interest they'd been charging. The leaders agreed and as a sign of their agreement and God's judgment, if they did not keep their word as Ann read Nehemiah 'shook out his robe' and, of course, it goes on to describe how he and those who worked for him made sure that they too treated others fairly and to all of this 'the whole assembly said 'Amen'' just like you and I do in church.

Do you know that the word 'amen' literally means 'let it be so'. But none of it will be so unless we show Jesus love, as well as talk about it, and it's not just the responsibility of the minister or the kirk session, it's our collective responsibility.

Now, just now the Church of Scotland and its General Assembly is very preoccupied with plans. Plans for restructuring presbyteries and parish reappraisal. I know you've been doing this embraced and you've tackled it in the best way possible. I'm ashamed to say that some of the churches in the Larbert area were not as open. Mine was, others weren't. And any of them are listening, pay attention.

If we become so preoccupied with plans and forget to be the presence of Jesus, not just in our churches but out there in the community, then we are falling short of our calling, our calling. Not just Scott, not just the kirk session, but all of us.

I asked Scott about some of your plans in Brightons about reaching out to the community. Rachel mentioned in the prayer the SU group in Wallacestone Primary. Scott's the chaplain there, is one of the chaplains at Braes High School. These are all wonderful things. There's plans to afoot, I gather, for a youth worker, but if any, especially of you older members, and I can address you as an older member, now, if anyone is thinking 'Why do we need a youth worker when we've got a young minister?' Scott cannot do everything. There is a huge shortage of ministers in the Church of Scotland so a youth worker is an excellent idea. The Larbert church has worked in conjunction with Scripture Union Scotland to form a trust, Larbert Churches Youth Trust that now employs one full-time and one part-time schools' workers. In my own congregation, my former congregation now, employs a part-time parish outreach worker and I cannot tell you the difference it has made, not just to the schools, but to the parish, people outside the church buildings actually understand that the people inside really

care, there's something different. These are the things that you, as a congregation, have in your plans, to be the presence of God. The days of flinging wide the church doors and saying 'Come on in, we're a wonderful church' and you are wonderful, you really are, they're gone, people walk on by. The days of the 99 sheep in the fold and going out to find the one, are gone too, because, actually, there's about four or five left in the fold and the other 90 odd are outside. They need to be met. You need to be the presence of God. You need to show Jesus' love and then invite them in.

So, Nehemiah's problem of social injustice ruining people's lives and the complicity of the politicians led him to plan to right the wrongs and what was needed then is needed now in 21st century, western culture. But the Church of Scotland especially needs to concentrate, especially on finding, rediscovering the presence of God and we, as the church, are called to be His presence to others. Where do we start?

Right here, of course! Because God uses our experiences to shape and form us into the people that He wants us to be.

And so, finally, you'll be pleased to know, what happened to that young teacher with whom we began. Well, God used his experiences too. Because, well over 42 years later he's standing right in front of you and if He can use me believe me, He can use all of you even more. Please be the presence of God. Amen.