



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Sermon Notes

Neh.8.1-4a & 8-12, Col.3.12-17, Matt.24.30-3]

Bible Sunday – 29th October, 2017

Nehemiah 8:1-12

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

After a few Israelites had returned from exile things were still looking pretty precarious for the people. Nehemiah had managed to attend to the physical security of the people and Ezra hoped to do the same for their spiritual security, almost interrupting the work on the walls, "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel." (Ezra 7:10)

Something was needed to pull everyone together or the nation was at risk of fragmenting into oblivion. Brexit seems to be presenting us with a similar problem – confusion, indecision and division that need healing or nothing will get done. The place of the church and Christian faith in society is also facing challenging times.

In this passage we're not told the exact text that Ezra read but we can see the effect it had on people. The Bible is a great read but we mustn't be so pre-occupied with the actual text that we don't let the Holy Spirit lead us to the one who is the Word made flesh.

The effect here is to draw everyone together (v.1), to present them with reality (v.8 - and we need that as much as ever, even if it reduces us to tears), to reaffirm the holiness of God (v.9), and to offer them joy, nourishment and hope (v.12).

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Great theology always needs grounding in practical reality – ‘Be nice to one another.’ There’s a lot more to it than following laws in a cold-hearted way. Mark Twain once talked about some people being, ‘good in the worst sense of the word.’

v.12 Paul here is concerned with character whereas in society today we're more concerned with personality, and there's a difference. Character is about content, personality is more to do with image. People have attractive, forceful, magnetic, warm personalities, but you can't use those adjectives of someone's character. In terms of character they are either good or bad. The shift is from what's deep down to what it all looks like on the outside. The way celebrities have replaced heroes in society is a very good sign of this.

Kindness - same root as the word from which we get Christ.

Humility - the opposite of pride, which causes most of what goes wrong in the world today.

Meekness = having the power but using it wisely.

In the gospels, compassion always led to action.

v.13 After pride, lack of forgiveness (which is really pride as well), is most destructive force at work in the world. Forgiveness is the main achievement of the cross - we can be forgiven. If God sees it as our greatest need, then we ought to practice it a bit more - there are few human ills that can't be overcome or prevented with forgiveness.

Without pride and with forgiveness our courts would be empty, our armies idle and our churches probably full.

v.14

“And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.” (The Message) Just like an old coat, it's how everyone expects to see us – our default mode, whatever else we do as well.

v.16 Does the 'word of God' live with us as a servant (to justify our will) or as lord (to shape our will)?

'One another' = you all have a part to play.

If something lives in us, it transforms what we are.

v.17 Live totally for Christ, worthily of him, and gratefully to him.

Matthew 24:30-35

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

v.30 Someone coming to visit who hasn't arrived yet, though you can hear their footsteps - 'the room is big with his presence...'

Jesus may not have known the date and time, but he did know that we needed to live in full awareness of there being more to this life than what we could see here and now. This is emphasised by one of Matthew's favourite words, 'Then...' (v30).

Even people who do not recognise Jesus now will sense something of his presence when he returns.

Apparently Stephen Hawking's 'A Brief History of Time', which is about the origins of the universe and so on, is one of the best-selling unread books of all time - renowned for being a book people like to have lying around to impress people, whilst being too complicated to digest. I'm sure we can all think of other such books, and in particular, the Bible - which must be another of the most 'unread' best-sellers of all time. People want a copy somewhere in the house, they know it's important, but they remain more familiar with the cover than the contents.