

All the trouble...

Nehemiah 6

I wanted to tell this story with a natural story arc.... When I read through Nehemiah 6, and saw the subtitle on the passage.... I saw

"The Wall is Completed"

The word complete is actually a really good word in Hebrew, it's the same word as fullness, and the same word as Peace.

Everything is full, everything is complete.

And sure enough, here is the verse...

Nehemiah 6...

"So the wall was finished on the 25th of the month of Ellul, in fifty-two days: verse 15

And verse 16 is also good

"And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around them were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God."

So that's great, fantastic, after 52 years of journeys, prayers, attacks,
The wall is completed, and the enemies are bowed down.

The END...

Except it's not is it.

Here is a phrase that is not found in the Bible, with very possible exception of Revelation 21 and 22.

"And they all lived happily after."

Because it's not even the end of chapter 6, and the book itself has 7 chapters to go.

Let me illustrate with an example from this Church here in Aberfeldy.

The campaign to rebuild this Church sanctuary began in 19XX with the ideas of XXX. For many years the people built and saved and prayed for the renewal of the Church here. And then on XXXX the building was eventually completed, and people walked down from the building here, and entered in, and at that moment, could you use this phrase

“And they all lived happily ever after.”

No you can't

You can get “they all lived”

You can get “they all lived ever after” - because we are in Christ

You can get “they all lived happily and difficultly and toughly and gratefully and contentedly and disappointedly and surprisedly and prayerfully every after.”

But until we get to Revelation 21 and 22, we will never get

“And they all lived happily ever after”.

In amongst this moment of completion, let us look at all the things that Nehemiah was dealing with.

Now look at verse 1...

“When it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates –”

So at this point, “it was reported”

It is coming to people with hostile intent

The rest of our enemies

And notice that a lot of rumours are swirling round, in fact even this rumour is inaccurate - it is said that the wall is completed, when in fact the doors on the gates are not completed.

And in this place of rumour, words not quite marrying up with reality, Nehemiah gets this message

“Let us make an appointment together in one of the villages of the plain of Ono”

This is an innocent request, and it sounds like a difficult thing to refuse,

Not to meet would look provocative,

But Nehemiah perceives that they intended to do him harm - how does he know this -

because these people have done this before, there is no sign of change within him, and

he knows that he himself has become a target. They intended to do me harm, they intended to do me evil - Nehemiah will not be lured.

That is the common tactic of the enemy, try and get you by yourself, with false promise of safe passage.

Nehemiah himself plays the game, he says, - oh I can't come down, I am very very busy, I am engaged in a great work, why should the work stop.

So this happens four times - and each time the pressure is building on Nehemiah.

The fifth time a messenger comes from Sanballat, this time an open letter in his hand, and this time it is more subtle. Because Sanballat is trying to play the honest broker, but he is reporting rumours.

Nothing to do with me, but I am hearing reports that you are planning to rebel, and that your prophets have proclaimed "There is a king in Jerusalem"

This is total fake news, total fabrication, but even if people don't believe, they still sow the deeds of doubt.

At this point Nehemiah first of all defends himself
"No such thing has taken place"

And then "you are inventing this out of your own mind."

I recently was talking to someone who is involved in a family dispute, and in their view someone in their family is making up all sorts of stories about them - in fact they are utterly mystified as to why this is happening, there are deeper things going on.

But I said to the person concerned, do not let this lie, you must defend yourself, It is right to defend yourself if there is false information about, even to do what Nehemiah does here, and say that the people are making things up.

But Nehemiah sees what is going on here, it is trying to create fear, which will then dampen enthusiasm for the work, so he prays, and he asks God for strength - not a big prayer it would appear here, but he carries on working.

Then a new tactic. - he goes to a man called Shemaiah who is confined to his house - we do not know if this is because he is under house arrest, or because he does not have mobility. But Nehemiah goes and talks, and the man seems to have a bit of advice which has Nehemiah's best interests at heart "Go into the temple and hide because they are planning to kill you". Run away, they are going to get you - maybe because Shemaiah was used to hiding he wanted everyone else to do the same.

There seems to be some hint as well that God is giving this message.

But perhaps Nehemiah has enough confidence to know that this message is not consistent with any other message he has had from God, so he does not believe it, in fact he sees that the prophets have been bribed. Do you see that Nehemiah's enemies are trying to use his faith, which is his great strength, to undermine him.

And Nehemiah remains utterly single-minded. He knows what he is here for - he is not here to be popular, he is not here to be lauded, he only cares about the wall, the city, and God regarding him - he has this unique ability to worry only about what God thinks about him.

So that is attempt number 6

We have had 4 meet up attempts

We have had the false rumours

We have had the prophet saying "Run to the temple"

And it seems like there is a general atmosphere from the prophets - the very people he would want to help him "Noadiah the prophetess and the other prophets who wanted to make me afraid"

So that is attempt number 7 - all the prophets

So we have one wall

And 7 attempts to intimidate -

That's not a great ratio

Okay the enemies are dismayed also

But he still has seven attempts against him.

Then we get more rumours, and emails flying around the palace...

The nobles are sending many letters to Tobiah - 8

Tobiah is sending many letters to them - 9

And Tobiah is connected. Look at this

Son in law of Shecaniah - 10

His son was married the daughter of Meshullam - 11

They speak of his good deeds to me - 12 - you are just making this up Nehemiah

They speak of what I say to him - 13

Tobiah sends letters to intimidate me - 14

14 things against him

One wall.

That is what happens when you do the right thing...

You never get to happily ever after.

I think of the way that it is constant.

I think of the great psalm of salvation

Where there is a remembrance of the time I cried out to the Lord, and he bent down and lifted me up

And we can say- You have multiplied your wondrous deeds and thoughts towards us

I have not kept silent

And yet still - evils - the exact same word as do harm - have encompassed me without number

They are more than the hairs my head my iniquities

May those who love your salvation say "Great is the Lord"

As for me, I am poor and needy

Do not delay oh my God.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire,

Always... God seems to have made it this way, not wanting perfection, somehow realising that struggle and challenge is what makes us...

George McLeod built that Abbey, and then said that the view across the Sound of Iona was worse than going back to the trenches.

There is always struggle because God prizes our redemption, prizes the pain of it the making of it, the honing of it, like the way that the Israelites crossed the wilderness to be ready for the Promised land.

Always we have to turn to him, always

That is what Repentance means, the constant turning of the mind towards the kingdom.

Or Jesus, who deals with constant threats against his life,

Intimidation

His cup

The whips

The thorns

The abuse

The nails

The thirst

Everything, until he cries it is finished

This is the way it is with God... he uses our sufferings and they are constant

And that is the point here

God is still building the wall

The wall gets built in this atmosphere

It is in that place that Jesus cries "It is finished"

This is what will happen

Stay the course,

Have courage

Stand firm

Build the Wall

AMEN