*Dear Cranmer Group Friends,*

*I hope that this finds you all well, and hopeful. Whilst spring weather has seemed to come and go at times, we find hope in the turning of the seasons to warmer, drier and sunnier times, and also, of course, in the success of the amazing Covid vaccination programme and decreasing numbers of cases, hospital admissions and deaths from the dreadful virus. But, above all, we find our hope in the certainty we share as Christians in Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected.*

*I recall saying at the end of January that I’d do my best to be much more up-to-date with getting to you the transcripts of our services over the coming weeks. I’m very sorry, I really don’t seem to have done very well with that at all, as we now find ourselves not far off the middle of March... So you have another “bumper pack” of services and sermons from me here.*

*During Lent, we’re following a preaching series on the Book of Nehemiah, whom God called to rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem. It has much wisdom for us as - God willing - we come out of lockdown and begin a “new normal” life, and also as we develop a new vision for our Cranmer Group. Your Benefice Council and a new ‘Ministry Team’ group from all of our parishes are prayerfully developing this with me. We hope that we will see great fruit from it in the months and years to come, with new followers of Jesus in our communities; deepening discipleship amongst all of you, our existing parishioners; and increasing signs of God’s Kingdom throughout our communities, as we serve and minister to our villages.*

*With my prayers and God’s blessing throughout this Lenten season,*



**Rev. Tim Chambers
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**17th February 2021 (Ash Wednesday)**

**Nehemiah 1:1-11; Matthew 6:1-6 & 16-18**

**Sermon: “A Vision of Renewal ”**

Today, Ash Wednesday, marks the beginning of Lent. This year we approach this time in a way unlike any other we’ve known, certainly in my lifetime, and - with the possible exception of those of us who recall the Second World War – in the lifetime of any of us.

Lent is traditionally a season in which many people look to *give up* something for these weeks, perhaps as a form of penance, or in order that we might create space in our lives for time spent with God. But we come to it *this* year after so long in which we’ve all given up so much already, as a consequence of the pandemic. Our relationship with, and attitude towards, Lent *this* year, may be different as a consequence of what we *have* lived through, and what we *continue* to live through. And we’ll be very conscious of this in our services over the coming weeks.

And in fact, I’ve sensed that it’s the right time for us to think about things rather *differently* in our preaching, this Lent. I *had* thought that we would follow a more ‘traditional’ pattern of readings and sermons but, the more that I sat with that idea, the less it felt to me like the right thing to do. I also said in our service this last Sunday, as I preached from St. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians and St. Mark’s Gospel, that over the coming weeks we are praying and thinking about our vision for the Cranmer Group - about God’s and our desires & plans for our six villages; for the people who call them home; & for the place of our church family within these communities.

Yes, this Lent is *absolutely* a time for spending time seeking God’s presence, but - as we pray that we’ve finally turned the corner with respect to this awful pandemic, & the repeated ‘Lents’ of lockdown we’ve endured over the last year – I believe it’s very much also a time for us to do this looking *forward* to the possibilities of what may lie ahead; to what God has in store for us after this ‘desert time’.

So, *this* season of Lent, I’ve come to the conclusion that God is saying to us in the Cranmer Group that it’s the right time to follow a set of Bible readings from the Old Testament that speak of precisely this sort of situation; of *coming out* of a desert time; of *emerging* from a period of exile; and of God’s people *building anew*. And that’s the Book of Nehemiah.

Some of you, I imagine, will be familiar with Nehemiah. For others of you, this may be a part of the Old Testament that you’ve never really explored before. But it doesn’t matter which of those applies to you, since God’s Word - although it always retains at its very heart, His truth - speaks to us in different *ways* and with different *emphases,* at different times. And I sense God is saying to us at this moment that it’s time for us to open our ears, our eyes and our hearts to the part of the story of the People of God that’s told by Nehemiah, and to *hear*, and *reflect* upon, and prayerfully *act* upon, what God’s saying to us through man and his story.

I’m only going to speak briefly this morning, but want to suggest to you some themes at the start of Nehemiah’s story that I believe are applicable to us in our situation today; to this season of Lent; and to this coming time of renewal, both in our church family - as we’ll again be able to gather and worship and be God’s people for our communities – and in these communities themselves.

It’s always important to give context to the Scripture that we’re looking at, but it’s especially so in the case of a passage like today’s. So, a quick summary. After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel had split into two Kingdoms: Judea in the south, around Jerusalem, and Israel in the north. Both Kingdoms went through a succession of generally ‘bad’ kings, interspersed with the occasional ‘good’ one (all recounted in the Books of 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles), but first Israel and then Judah succumbed to mighty invaders from the North-East, Assyria and Babylon, with Jerusalem finally falling in 587BC. The Temple was burned to the ground; the city and all its defences destroyed; and the people of Israel were taken as captives to foreign lands in the heart of the Babylonian empire, hundreds of miles from their homes.

Roll forward to the mid-5th century BC, and we find Nehemiah, one of the Jewish exiles, now in the city of Susa, in an important position in the court of the Persian King, Artaxerxes, whose predecessors had in turn overthrown the Babylonians. Jerusalem – we read in verse 3 - is still in ruins, its walls “broken down”, and is gates “burned with fire”. And those of the people of Israel – the “remnant” - who had survived the exile in foreign lands and were back in Jerusalem, were “in great trouble and disgrace”. Things were looking pretty awful for God’s people, and for the land and the city where they had dwelt, which God, in his covenant promises right back at the start of the story of the people of Israel, had said to Abraham would be their home and inheritance.

Now, I don’t want to draw *too* close a pair of parallels between the situation *then* of God’s people, their land and their city, and the position in which we find ourselves in the Cranmer Group *today*; and most definitely *not* between the figure of Nehemiah, and me.

I don’t believe that we’re necessarily “in great trouble and disgrace” (not that there isn’t very considerable room for each one of us individually, and all of us collectively as our church family, to “do better”); and I’d certainly never dream of comparing myself by implication with a figure of Nehemiah’s godliness, courage & action.

But we *do* find ourselves in a position where - like *any* parish or benefice in the country, after these Covid-ravaged months (and indeed, in our case we could also say, after well over two years before then, when you were vicar-less) - our Cranmer Group has lost much. And where, if we look at our six villages and all of our friends and neighbours in them, we see a huge proportion of the men, women and children in them, who do *not* know the love and grace, peace and joy of Jesus Christ in their lives; who do not know what it is to live with the fullness and wholeness that comes from the Holy Spirit alive in us; and who, in far too many cases, live in brokenness; their lives and relationships in pieces like the walls of Jerusalem before Nehemiah.

And a position where, too – if we are prayerful, faithful, imaginative and courageous – *we* have an extraordinary opportunity to *rebuild*, *in* Christ, and *through* the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, our church family, at the very centre of our communities, reaching out to all; welcoming them to fellowship and to faith; and seeing each one of them and us grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

So if we look at the figure of Nehemiah (which we very much will do throughout the whole of this book, over the coming weeks), at the start of this story he tells, we find him in a desert time; a time of exile from the Promised Land; a Lenten time. And I suggest that we see, in this initial encounter with him, four things that are of central importance for us also as we look upwards and forwards, to move on from ruins to renewal.

First, when Nehemiah he heard about the state in which God’s people were living, and the ruins of His Holy City, he sat down and wept. Nehemiah loved God’s people. His heart ached with sorrow for what had become of them, and what they had lost. His heart broke when he sees how far God’s people had fallen away.

Second, as he grieved for God’s people, Nehemiah “mourned and fasted and prayed.” This was *not* a prayer of show; *not* the sort of prayer and fasting against which Jesus warns his listeners in today’s Gospel reading from St. Matthew; but a cry from the heart, from a place of desert and exile and pain, contending with God for the lives and the livelihoods of His people, wanting them to turn again fully to the Lord, and so to find fullness of life once again.

And, third, Nehemiah acknowledged to the Lord where he and his family had themselves gone wrong in their relationship with God: that they had “acted very wickedly towards [Him]. He doesn’t try to gloss over what he knows in his heart, but comes to God in confession and repentance, knowing that he himself has to be ‘right with God’ before turning to his prayers for others.

And, finally, Nehemiah placed his trust in the Lord, “the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love Him”; that God would be faithful to the people as He had been in the past; that He would answer the prayers of the faithful, and bring them to fruition.

So as we start this Lent season, mourning what we have lost; holding this present moment in our hands before God; and looking to discern our collective future in the Benefice, I pray that we too will show these same passions towards our God; towards our villages and communities; and towards our families and friends; our brothers and sisters in Christ. That we will show:

A deep *com*passion and love for God’s people;

A placing of ourselves in a position of *im*passioned prayer;

A honesty and humility about ourselves, & where we’ve fallen short of God’s plans for us; and…

A trust in God’s faithfulness to us and to His people in this place, and that He will bring to fruition the prayers of those who ask.

I pray that, as we begin this season of Lent, and our journey through the story of Nehemiah, each one of us will read (or re-read) this extraordinary story; that we will find inspiration from it; and that we too will see God at work, in power, in and through our people and communities.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**February 21st - The First Sunday of Lent**

**(Nehemiah Chapter 2)**

**“Prayerful Action and Active Prayer”**

The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for the First Sunday of Lent
(Common Worship)**

Heavenly Father,
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,
and grew closer to you in the desert:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer
that we may witness to your saving love
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Forty Days and Forty Nights**

**Played by Sarah Hadfield**

(by George Hunt Smyttan, Rector of Hawksworth, 1851-58)

Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted, and yet undefiled.

Sunbeams scorching all the day;
Chilly dew-drops nightly shed;
Prowling beasts about thy way;
Stones thy pillow; earth thy bed.

Shall not we thy sorrow share,
And from earthly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
Glad with thee to suffer pain?

So shall we have peace divine:
Holier gladness ours shall be;
Round us, too, shall angels shine,
Such as ministered to thee.

Keep, O keep us, Saviour dear,
Ever constant by thy side;
That with thee we may appear
At the eternal Eastertide.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 2
(New International Version)**

**Read by Pam Loughna**

***Artaxerxes sends Nehemiah to Jerusalem***

*In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’*

*I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, ‘May the king live for ever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’*

*The king said to me, ‘What is it you want?’*

*Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.’*

*Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.*

*I also said to him, ‘If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?’ And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.*

*When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

***Nehemiah inspects Jerusalem’s walls***

*I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.*

*By night I went out through the Valley Gate towards the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on towards the Fountain Gate and the King’s Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and re-entered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.*

*Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.*

*They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.*

*But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. ‘What is this you are doing?’ they asked. ‘Are you rebelling against the king?’*

*I answered them by saying, ‘The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.’*

**Sermon: “Prayerful Action and Active Prayer”
Rev. Tim Chambers**
Lord, I pray that your Word will touch the hearts of each one of us this morning; that this story of Nehemiah will grab our attention and seize our imaginations; and that I will be able to speak the words that you wish me to share with your people in our Cranmer Group parishes this morning. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

It may seem a bit strange to some of you this morning that we’re not *starting* a sermon series this morning, in Chapter 1 of the Book of Nehemiah. We’re already on Chapter 2! How did that happen? What did I miss? Well, we had an online service in the middle of this last week, for Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent. To be honest, I’d planned to begin then a sermon series, leading us through this time in which we prepare ourselves for Holy Week and Easter; a sermon series along very traditional Lenten themes.

But as I was already partway through writing my Ash Wednesday sermon on Tuesday, I sensed really strongly, that God was saying to me that now *wasn’t* the time to ‘be traditional’ in this respect, but that this season is to be one in which we reflect *differently*, as we seek more of His presence in our lives, both individually, and collectively as our church family.

And that (as I shared with you all last Sunday), as we’re prayerfully seeking a new Vision for the Cranmer Group, now is the right time for us to explore a book of the Old Testament, that of Nehemiah. A book that begins in seeking God’s presence in a ‘desert time’, a Lenten time that has many echoes of our current lockdown of loss, and grief. But a book that *also* speaks to us so powerfully of Godly vision; of looking *forward* to new possibilities in prayer and in action. Of what the Lord has in store for us *after* this ‘period of exile’; as we *emerge*, God’s people, seeking to *build anew*, seeking to witness to our communities in imaginative and bold ways, and minister to them as they try to come to terms with all of the impacts of the pandemic on us.

So my first encouragement to you all this morning, if you weren’t able to be with us on the morning of Ash Wednesday, is to go to the Cranmer Group YouTube page, or our podcast page - both are clearly signposted on the Benefice Website – and catch up with what I shared on Wednesday there. I hope you enjoy it!

If that’s you (and also for those of you who were able to listen then, by way of a refresher), here’s an ultra-quick scene-setter for you: Israel had been defeated, Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed, and the people of God taken in slavery to Babylon. Fast forward over a century. Some Israelites had been allowed to return, but their holy city was still rubble. Nehemiah - a Jew who’d stayed in exile, but risen there to a position of great importance, as royal cupbearer – was told of the plight of his own people, and he wept for them, and for the ruins of Jerusalem. And Nehemiah turned to God in prayer and fasting, humility and repentance, to seek His purposes, so that he - Nehemiah - could do God’s will for his broken people.

So, we find ourselves this morning at the beginning of Nehemiah, Chapter 2. It’s certainly not one of the *shortest* chapters in the Bible, nor is it lacking in exotic names, so a big thank you to Pam this morning, for reading it so well for us all.

And at the very start of Chapter 2, there’s a really important piece of information for us - but one that we may easily miss. Nehemiah takes wine, and – having tasted it as the trusted royal cupbearer, to ensure it’s not poisoned - he gives it to King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah tells us that this takes place during *Nisan*. The month of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar occurs at the same time as February to March, in our *Western* calendar. But at the start of Chapter 1, Nehemiah tells us that he receives the news of the desolation in Jerusalem in the month of Kislev. Kislev occurs during our November to December, which means that Nehemiah has been weeping and mourning and fasting and praying for the people of Israel, for *at least three whole months*.

Nehemiah was in a position of responsibility in the city of Susa, which contemporary accounts tell us was a city of libraries and schools, gardens and parks - a place of great civilization for its time. He would have led a very comfortable life by the standards of the day, there. But once he’d received the reports from Jerusalem, of what was going on with the Jewish nation in that ruined and despairing city, God put on Nehemiah’s heart, what was on *His* heart. What *really* mattered to Nehemiah was the wellbeing of God’s people; the state of what, from a New Testament perspective, we might call the Kingdom of God. Despite his material comfort, he was so *dis*-comforted by this news, that this was the only way in which he could respond. To such an extent that he wept, prayed and fasted for months on end.

This is hugely challenging to us, isn’t it? When’s the last time any of us – certainly, when’s the last time that *I*? – prayed for more than one hour, let alone days, or weeks or months, because God has placed a burden on my or your heart? For the disciple of Jesus, there’s no greater priority than the Kingdom of God; than *praying* for the Kingdom of God: “Lord, Thy Kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.” And yet we continually find ourselves distracted; valuing other things too highly; trying other avenues first, rather than doing what Nehemiah does: turning to God. Prayer is Nehemiah’s *first response*; *not* his last resort.

Prayer is Nehemiah’s *first response*; *not* his last resort. Nehemiah prays, and *then* he acts. But when he does so, he *acts* *prayerfully*.

We read in verses 1 and 2 that Artaxerxes notices that Nehemiah is sad. This would have been extremely risky in the presence of the King, since it implied that not everything was perfect under his rule – and indeed Nehemiah says, “I was very much afraid”. But Nehemiah responds to the King’s question in a way that would have appealed to his sensibilities. For the Persians, reverence for ancestors was critically important, so by responding to Artaxerxes that the state of the city of Jerusalem brought dishonour upon his ancestors, Nehemiah maximised the possibility of receiving a favourable response from the King.

And this prayerful response from Nehemiah immediately opens a tiny crack in the door of opportunity: “The King said to me, ‘What is it you want?’”

Or, to put it differently, “What is your vision, Nehemiah?”

This is Nehemiah’s moment. Even in this second, after all of the hundreds of thousands of seconds of prayer that had gone before, Nehemiah shoots up to God an ‘arrow prayer’ - a prayer in the moment; direct & immediate: “Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the King…”

As Nehemiah prays, he goes into action. He knows that, if he’s to make the difference to God’s people, for which he’s been praying with all his heart, *this* is the moment. And he’s clearly been doing his homework. Nehemiah says later, when he has arrived in Jerusalem, “I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.” In his months of prayer, God has been placing concrete things on his heart. Nehemiah hasn’t just been praying in isolation, nor has he just rushed headlong into the task, relying on his own intelligence and efforts - he hasn’t fallen, so to speak, into these two ditches on either side of the road that God has set for him.

Nehemiah knows that he has to have his answers thought out for whenever the moment comes; when he has an opportunity to speak with the King about what God had placed on his heart. So, he thinks it through beforehand. He knows what safe passages he’ll require. He knows what material resources he’ll need for rebuilding, and where they are to be found. He knows what personnel he’ll need to accompany him on his journey to Jerusalem, to ensure his safe passage. So when the King does ask him, he knows exactly what to respond. Nehemiah demonstrates that we need to maintain a balance between faith in the sovereignty of God over a situation, and a need for logical, common-sense planning. What perhaps we might acknowledge as the capacity to be filled at the same time, both with the Holy Spirit and with common sense! But, most importantly, it is not just “a good idea”, but “a *God* idea”; action born out of prayer.

Prayer and action are not an “either or”, but a “BOTH AND”. We, like Nehemiah, are called both to *prayerful* action, and to *active* prayer. And we’re called, like Nehemiah, to join in with what God is already up to; to have our hearts broken for what breaks God’s heart; and to have vision birthed within us, that dwells in the tension between what *is*, and what *could be*, in our communities.

If we look more closely at Nehemiah’s story, we see three ways in which prayerful action and active prayer interrelate.

Firstly, prayer prompts the action; it’s the *mother* of action. But the corollary of this is that, if our actions and all without prayer, then we may have got them wrong.

Secondly, prayer is what makes the action fruitful. Nehemiah says repeatedly, in verses 8 and 18 of chapter 2, “It is because the gracious hand of my God was upon me”, that the King has responded favourably to his requests, and his prayer can be transformed into effective action, as he finds himself in Jerusalem to start the fulfillment of his dream for God’s people.

So, prayer *initiates* the action; prayer *enables* the action; and, thirdly, prayer engages others to *join in with* the action. When Nehemiah tells the people of Jerusalem of his vision; of God’s favour upon him; and of Artaxerxes’s support for his plans, they too wish to join the good work: “Let us start rebuilding,” they declare – Nehemiah’s dream of the renewal of God’s city and people is underway!

All of this, like much of the story of Nehemiah, is great at showing us God’s faithfulness and sovereignty at work, whilst also giving us some really good life lessons too. But how does Nehemiah’s story so far, shed light upon our envisioning of the future for our Cranmer Group parishes?

Firstly, forgive me, Lord, I’m afraid I can’t claim to have spent the last three months in constant prayer and fasting, and grieving over the way in which so many of the people in our communities have no knowledge of God’s love, or of what it is to be part of the beautiful family that is Christ’s Church. But I do pray, and I continue to pray every day, that God *will* show us what is on His heart for the people of our communities, and – as for Nehemiah – that he *will* give us an extraordinary and compelling dream for the future of His people in this place, and that we will co-labour with Him to bring that to reality.

I’ve invited each member of both our Ministry Team (a small, prayerful group, from all of our villages) and also our Benefice Council, to ask God for what’s on their hearts for our people, and we will share these personal visions over the coming weeks, as we seek – intertwined with continuing prayer – to determine the Lord’s plans for our communities.

For those of you listening who are *part* of these two groups, it’s *my* prayer that you’ll spend good time in the presence of God, and that he will place clear pictures in your minds, of His dreams for us all.

And for those of you who *aren’t* in either the Ministry Team or the Benefice Council, may I encourage you to do two things? First of all, please can you pray that those of us who are part of these formal groups, will truly seek God’s heart, and also pray that – in a good way! – like Nehemiah as he stood before Artaxerxes to tell him of his vision, we will find ourselves “afraid” of what lies before us, as a result of imagining our shared future in this way. Because if we *don’t* have, in our Christian lives, something that demands of us spiritual *courage*; something that builds our faith as a constant reminder of our dependence on the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus, then I’d humbly suggest to us all that our vision is too small – and therefore that it’s very unlikely to be God’s vision for us all too!

And, secondly, I encourage you all to join with us in seeking God’s heart for our communities and for our Cranmer Group church family within them, at our First Things intercessory prayer gathering, on Zoom, at 8pm on Sunday March 7th (details on the Benefice Website). Do join us then, and be part of our journey of prayer towards a shared future that continues to honour our past, but which also imagines a future for our communities and churches, alive with the presence of the Holy Spirit; full of the ways of the Kingdom; and bringing all glory to the Lord.

In the words, once again, of the Collect for today with which we began our service, “Heavenly Father, … help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer, that we may witness to your saving love”.

In Jesus’s mighty name I pray this. Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Jules Humpheson**

In the power of the Spirit, let us pray to God the Father, that through his dear Son, he would accomplish his will for the Church, the world, and all the people we pray for….

As we enter this season of Lent, let us all take time to reflect on the way we live our lives and how that impacts others. Make us more mindful of how we should look after the world that we’ve neglected so badly, that we may leave it better than we found it. Let us also be mindful of all those who live in poverty, in fear, in loneliness throughout the world, that we may help them in their times of need.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

In our country we pray for the Government, that they lead with integrity and honesty instead of the self-interest we experience so much of.

In our Benefice may we take time to think about our Vision process prayerfully, considering the future direction we should take to strengthen and grow our worshipping community. Let us take time to listen to others with open minds, so that we can help create a loving and caring future together, a future that is full of the hope we need so much at this time.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

We pray for the sick, that you may bring them comfort and care for their suffering. We pray for those who have died at this time and ask that you bring solace and comfort to those who mourn them. We also pray for the NHS staff, themselves suffering from the strain of coping with so many people sick and dying as a result of the pandemic. Give them strength and bring them hope that their trial is coming to an end.

Lord, in your mercy
**hear our prayer.**

Father, we rejoice in your Spirit. Send it again into our hearts, into our lives, and into our world. Hear our prayers, and save us in your love. We ask this through Christ our Lord.
**Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the First Sunday of Lent
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights: Give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end.
**Amen**

 **Be Thou My Vision
Played by Deb Hubbard**

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
Thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
Thou my great Father, and I thy true son;
Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Thou my whole armour, and thou my true might;
Thou my soul’s shelter, and thou my strong tower:
O raise Thou me heavenward, great power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and thou only the first in my heart,
O Sovereign of Heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven’s bright Sun,
Grant me its joys after vict’ry is won;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ give you the grace to grow in holiness,
to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him:
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you, and those you love, always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**

**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**February 28th - The Second Sunday of Lent**

**(Nehemiah 3:1-12)**

**“Step Up; Step Together; Step Out!”**

The Lord be with you **And also with you

The Collect for the Second Sunday of Lent
(Common Worship)**

Almighty God,

by the prayer and discipline of Lent

may we enter into the mystery

of Christ’s sufferings,

and by following in his Way

come to share in his glory;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Father Hear the Prayer We Offer**

**Played by Sarah Hadfield**

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
Nor for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength, that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters
Would we idly, quiet stay;
But would smite the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be Thou at our side.

Let our path be bright or dreary,
Storm or sunshine be our share;
May our souls, in hope unweary,
Make Thy work our ceaseless prayer.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 3, Verses 1-12
(New King James Version)**

**Read by Annie Dickinson**

***Rebuilding the Wall***

*1 Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel. 2 Next to Eliashib the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.*

*3 Also the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars. 4 And next to them Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz, made repairs. Next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs. Next to them Zadok the son of Baana made repairs. 5 Next to them the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.*

*6 Moreover Jehoiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors, with its bolts and bars. 7 And next to them Melatiah the Gibeonite, Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and Mizpah, repaired the residence of the governor of the region beyond the River. 8 Next to him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah, one of the goldsmiths, made repairs. Also next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs; and they fortified Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall. 9 And next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, leader of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs. 10 Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs in front of his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabniah made repairs.*

*11 Malchijah the son of Harim and Hashub the son of Pahath-Moab repaired another section, as well as the Tower of the Ovens. 12 And next to him was Shallum the son of Hallohesh, leader of half the district of Jerusalem; he and his daughters made repairs.*

**Sermon: “Step Up, Step Together, Step Out!”
Rev. Tim Chambers**
Lord, I pray that your Word will speak to each one of this morning, and that we will be inspired by the possibilities that come from the people of God acting in unity, for the purposes of Your Kingdom. Be in my words, I pray, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Admit it! Even the most gung-ho of us has a task that we always put off. It might be uprooting that fiendish bramble in the back garden. Sorting through those boxes in the spare room, into things to keep; things for the charity shop; or rubbish for the skip. Completing our tax return. And that’s just the start of my list, let alone yours…

There are certain passages in scripture that seem to come into the same category. Almost all of Leviticus. About 80% of Jeremiah. The genealogy at the start of Matthew’s Gospel. And Nehemiah 3…

Huge thanks and credit to Annie for coping with all of the multiple fiendish names that peppered our whole reading. And we’ve had just twelve verses – the chapter continues for another twenty in exactly the same way: “Next to him, Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired another section, from the entrance of Eliashib’s house to the end of it. The repairs next to him were made by the priests from the surrounding region. Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house.” And so on; and so on.

If we had a curate in our Benefice, today’s passage would, at first sight, be right up there in the category of “I think preaching this Sunday would be a wonderful development opportunity for you”. In fact, in one of the most widely-read Christian books of recent years on these scriptures, Charles R. Swindolls’ “Hand Me Another Brick: Leadership Lessons from Nehemiah”, the author goes from chapter 2, straight into chapter 4. Today’s reading? Just not in there!

So why haven’t I done the same? Why are we looking at this passage today? I’d have thought that most of us could see that, at a time when we’re prayerfully asking God what is His vision for our communities and our church family, the Book of Nehemiah has a real resonance – it’s about rebuilding; bringing new life; bringing new hope. But how can what’s apparently little more than a litany of Hebrew names from the fifth century BC, really be relevant to us today in the Cranmer Group?

Well, with all due respect to Charles Swindolls, I think he’s made a mistake in skipping this chapter in his book. Maybe he does so because, in fact, there isn’t a single reference to Nehemiah in this chapter 3. But I think that this lack of any reference to Nehemiah, in itself tells us the level of mutual trust in the relationship between him and the people of Jerusalem; in their shared enterprise of rebuilding.

If we remind ourselves of what’s gone before in this Book, in chapter 1, Nehemiah, serving the Persian King in the city of Susa, hears about the state of Jerusalem, and is so grieved that he prays and fasts for many days on end. In chapter 2, he explains to the King what is on his heart and, being given permission by Artaxerxes to go, he plans; gathers resources; travels to Jerusalem; looks over the condition of all the ruined fortifications, in preparation for the task ahead; and finally speaks to the inhabitants of his plans to rebuild.

So, at the most basic of levels, Nehemiah would have had to report back to the ‘sponsor’ of his mission to Jerusalem, King Artaxerxes, on all that he was doing, and he needed to keep the sort of detailed record of the rebuilding that we see in this morning’s passage. And this is definitely a function that chapter 3 fulfils. But there is much more to it than that.

Throughout the Old Testament, the story of the people of God is almost always that of a charismatic leader – a Moses, a Joshua, a David, who draws together an essentially wayward people for a time, aligned with God’s purposes, before they drift off again into renewed disobedience.

But this occasion recounted in Nehemiah 3, is different. For once (reinforced by the absence of a mention of Nehemiah throughout this whole chapter), it appears that the people of God are united behind the purposes of God, in order to bring them about.

Each person named by Nehemiah, from all kinds of locations and with all sorts of callings, has influence and agency in the rebuilding of the wall, to restore and bring back to life what’s in front of them; working alongside one another, skilled next to unskilled.

This list of people’s names is a brilliant picture of how each person – every one of us in the Church, the body of Christ - has a part to play in extending the Kingdom of God, here, today, too. For each one of us in our Cranmer Group of parishes, soon able – we pray – to renew our church life back in our buildings, and to extend our arms of welcome and hospitality towards all in our communities, we all have our own “section of wall” to rebuild.

We see in Nehemiah’s account of all of these different individuals with a common purpose, a prefiguring of the image that St. Paul famously paints in 1 Corinthians 12, of the church as a body, with all of those who form the whole, being different parts. Each complements the other, as they come together as one, where God wants them to be. You are where you are, because that is where God wants you to be. But it only works when they – we - all work together.

And the work that is recounted by Nehemiah is a thing of simple beauty, as all sorts of people roll up their sleeves and do the work of God. It doesn’t matter who all of these people are, they all come together to find their place. No-one is disqualified from God’s plans and God’s purposes. Everyone finds their part.

Most people rebuild the section of the wall that is in front of their own house. Meremoth, son of Uriah, is perhaps the over-achiever, if you like. He’s described in verse 4 as repairing the wall by the Fish Gate, but then, in verse 21, he’s also recorded as rebuilding another section, in front of the house of the High Priest, Eliashab.

Nehemiah records only one group of people in the whole city who do not participate in the rebuilding, in verse 5. The Tekoites repair their section of the wall, but “their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.” It’s perhaps telling that Nehemiah records that they are nobles. It seems, even though they acknowledged God as “their Lord”, they were unwilling to do something that they would have perceived as below their station: joining in with the manual labour of this reconstruction.

Contrast this with the Son of God, coming to serve, who – in the words of Philippians 2 – “being found in appearance as a man, …humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross”. Promoting their own place of importance above their posture of obedience, they fail to find their place in the great adventure of what God is doing in that city at that time. A warning for us also, perhaps – where might we let our pride get in the way, of joining in fully with God’s plans for our lives?

But what, I wonder, like these stretches of broken wall, is in front of us at this time, to which God invites us to be faithful, and play our wholehearted part in rebuilding? Where, in this season, regardless of who we might be, might God be calling us to STEP UP; be calling me and calling you to STEP UP and join in His plans for renewal in our communities and church family, as we seek to restore the people of God, and rebuild the His Kingdom in this place?

And, as we step up, who is “next to you”; who’s alongside you? With whom will you STEP TOGETHER? In this third chapter of Nehemiah, as he recounts all who rebuild their section of the wall, he uses the phrase “Next to him” or “next to them” 21 times. We are never called to build by ourselves, in isolation, but to build next to people, on our left and on our right, and in many cases in groups or in families. Nehemiah even records, in verse 12, Shallum son of Hallohesh, who built with his daughters. It’s a shame their names aren’t recorded - an unfortunate sign of the male-dominated times in which they lived - but it’s nevertheless extraordinary that, in such a society, these women (or perhaps even girls – we don’t know their ages) were a significant part of this incredible joint effort of reconstruction.

In the Cranmer Group, it’s my prayer that we not only “step together” in community alongside one another, but we “step together” as six churches, each one alongside the other five, with a united sense of where and how God is calling us to build His Kingdom, not by ourselves, but together. In the first steps of our Cranmer Group vision process that we’ve recently started, one of the words suggested to describe how we might seek to be as a Benefice was “vulnerable”. We courageously open up our lives to one another so that we might learn from one another. My faith builds up your faith; your relationship with God builds up mine.

Do you perhaps have people alongside you, who’ll support you in your faith, and who have different insights or wisdom to offer? And are you able to support others in the same way? Are they, or are you, in one of our Lent Groups? Or do you maybe attend the Diocesan Real LIFE discipleship course, or the Wrestling with God discussion group? Let’s journey together, deepening our love of, and knowledge of Jesus, so that we might be better equipped to address what’s in front of us. And particularly if you may be feeling ill-equipped in your faith, or if you’re not feeling capable of serving as you’d like, in whatever ministry, be encouraged! Look at those who built the walls of Jerusalem – Uzziel the goldsmith; Hananiah the perfume-maker; important officials such as Shallum, son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, all of whom presumably would have had absolutely no prior knowledge at all of what building a fortification entailed! If that’s how you feel at the moment, with respect to getting involved in serving in some form of ministry here in the Cranmer Group, when we are able to open up physically once again, then take encouragement from all of this list of names, who are witnesses to what God can do in the lives of apparently ‘unimportant’ people, when He moves in power, and his people follow where he calls – often right in front of them!

So, we step up, joining in God’s plans for our Benefice.

We step together, building God’s Kingdom alongside one another, across our whole Benefice.

And we STEP OUT.

It may seem that this is the most difficult of the three. But the lesson of Nehemiah is that almost all of the people did not have to construct some complex engineering on the other side of the city. They were tasked with building the wall opposite their house. Nehemiah’s command to the people of Jerusalem was, “Build here!”

God has placed us; God has placed me and he’s placed you, where he has, for His Kingdom purposes. Love His church; love your neighbour; and witness to our Lord where you are! We build the wall in front of our house!

So, like Nehemiah’s wall-builders 2500 years ago,

We step out – we believe that we all have something to give.

We step up – everyone gets to play their part.

And we step together – not as six individual churches, but as one united Cranmer Group, and - within that – in unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ on either side of us, as they too build the portion of the wall in front of their house.

Because the thing that each of us carries, the person and presence of Jesus, his love, his peace and his grace, I believe our communities are so much in need of, at this time!

It’s my prayer, that, together, we can show this to them, and allow God to do His work in their hearts, so that they too, will be drawn into the beautiful family of God here in our Cranmer Group villages.

In Jesus’s name, I pray. Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Richard Bullock**

During our Intercessions, I would be glad if, when I say, “Lord, in Your Mercy”, you could respond, “Hear our Prayer.”

Loving Heavenly Father, knowing your constant and loving care for the whole of your creation we come to offer our prayers of praise, thanksgiving adoration and intercessions seeking your love and support in our present condition. We are living through confusing and uncertain times when we scarcely recognise the world around us and feel, like your servant Ruth, we find ourselves strangers in a foreign land amid the alien corn. But we know that you are constantly with us, each one, and that we can absolutely rely on your constant guidance and support.

May we, in turn, love and support each other and all those with whom we come into contact in our daily lives, acknowledging that we can only show the same love you have for them which is shown in our own lives, and that only as we truly know you can we make you truly known. May we develop as a praying community growing in grace and devoted to your truths.

Lord, in Your Mercy,
**Hear Our Prayers.**

We pray, Lord, that as we contemplate your precious Word we will, like Nehemiah, apply ourselves to protecting and expanding your Kingdom – sometimes against the apathy, indifference and opposition of those who we believe have most to gain in becoming, with us, followers of your teachings. We thank you Lord for the guidance and expositions of your servant and Vicar, Tim. Help us so that by reading and studying your own precious Word, we shall see more clearly the love and power you offer to us to follow you more closely and become more like you.

Lord, in Your Mercy,
**Hear Our Prayers.**

Even as we see progress in the decline in the effects of Covid, we pray for all those still suffering from this and related illnesses, and those who feel alone and lonely as the result of current regulations. Help us to help each other, all those we know and love and, also, all members of our local communities in whatever way is most appropriate to our circumstances and their own.

We pray especially for the children of Orston Primary School and Archbishop Cranmer Academy, who found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly in unusual and possibly bewildering circumstances, but now face returning to their studies and recreating friendships and a learning environment. Help us to support them and show them that they too have the assurance that you are always with them. Keep them ever mindful of the lessons they have learned in their schools, and that you came to give to each one of them life in all its fullness.

Lord, in Your Mercy,
**Hear Our Prayers.**

Above all, Lord, we pray that each one of us may be aware of your presence in our lives, and seek prayerfully and sensitively to discern your will for each one of us.

Lord, in Your Mercy,
**Hear Our Prayers.**

We pray that, in these often dark and confused times, you will give wisdom and strength to the leaders of our churches and communities. May their leadership and decisions show them to be infused with your love and a recognition that we are, in your creation, all neighbours one of another, needing and deserving each other’s love and support, to make and keep it as perfect as you intended.

Lord, in Your Mercy,
**Hear Our Prayers.**

We ask all this, Lord, in the precious name of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray to His Father, as Our Father….

 **The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:
**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the Second Sunday of Lent
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended against all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

 **Cornerstone
Played by Clare Chambers**

My hope is built on nothing less,
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly trust in Jesus’ name.

Christ alone,
Cornerstone,
Weak made strong,
In the Saviour's love;
Through the storm,
He is Lord,
Lord of all.

When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

Christ alone,
Cornerstone,
Weak made strong,
In the Saviour's love;
Through the storm,
He is Lord,
Lord of all.

When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh, may I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless, stand before the throne.

Christ alone,
Cornerstone,
Weak made strong,
In the Saviour's love;
Through the storm,
He is Lord,
Lord of all.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ give you the grace to grow in holiness,
to deny yourself,
take up your cross,
and follow him:
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you, and those you love, always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**

**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**March 7th - The Third Sunday of Lent**

**(Nehemiah Chapter 4)**

**“Remember the Lord!”**

The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent
(Common Worship)**

Eternal God,
give us insight
to discern your will for us,
to give up what harms us,
and to seek the perfection we are promised
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Most Merciful God**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Most merciful God, our Father of grace,
We confess we have sinned, we have walked our own way;
Our love has been fickle, our hearts they have strayed,
So, Lord, in Your mercy, forgive us we pray.

Most merciful God, our Father of grace,
We confess we have sinned, we have walked our own way;
Our love has been fickle, our hearts they have strayed,
So, Lord, in Your mercy, forgive us we pray.

Restore us, change us,
Lord, lead us on.
Restore us, change us,
Lord, lead us on.

That we may do justly,
Forever love mercy,
Together walk humbly,
With You.

That we may do justly,
Forever love mercy,
Together walk humbly,
With You.

Restore us, change us,
Lord, lead us on.
Restore us, change us,
Lord, lead us on.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 4
(New King James Version)**

**Read by Annie Dickinson**

***The Wall Defended Against Enemies***

*But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?”*

*Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.”*

*Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders.*

*So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.*

*Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night.*

*Then Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.”*

*And our adversaries said, “They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.”*

*So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, “From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.”*

*Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”*

*And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders [b]were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.*

*Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, “The work is great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”*

*So we labored in the work, and half of [c]the men held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, “Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day.” So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, except that everyone took them off for washing.*

**Sermon: “Remember the Lord!”
Rev. Tim Chambers**
Lord, I pray that you will be in my words, and in our hearts and minds this morning. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Well, we’re continuing our Lent sermon series on the Book of Nehemiah, and this morning we’ve reached Chapter 4, where things take a rather different turn.

Last week, we heard how, just like the people of Nehemiah’s Jerusalem, we in our Cranmer Group of churches have been placed in our communities to “Build here!” God calls each one of us today, like Nehemiah’s wall-builders 2500 years ago, to step out, believing that we all have something to give; to step up – with everyone playing their part; and to step together – not as six individual churches, but as one united Cranmer Group, building His Kingdom in this place, in unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Last Sunday, all seemed to be going really well for Nehemiah and God’s people. He’s come so far from his original vision for God’s people and God’s city. Day by day; stone by stone; the walls are growing, once again, to their full height. But then things start to go sour. Nehemiah, and God’s people as they labour on these walls, begin to encounter opposition.

Just as we considered last week what Scripture might be telling us, in the story of Nehemiah, about the nature of God’s call on us to build His Kingdom in this place, in this time, it’s worth pausing for a moment now, to reflect on the opposition that those who follow God’s call on their lives – and that includes us - will face. Jesus is clear to his disciples in John 15, that, since they have been chosen by him, they will be hated: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also,” he tells them. We too can expect opposition.

Indeed, to encounter opposition is an intrinsic part of what it is to be a Christian. This certainly isn’t to claim that this sort of opposition is the same in all parts of the world. We are only-too-aware at this moment, as Pope Francis makes his historic visit, to stand in solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq, that the level of opposition and persecution that they face there, is of a completely different order of magnitude (and danger) to anything that we might ever encounter here in the UK.

Nevertheless, at some point in our Christian journeys, all of us will have faced; will be facing; or will come to face, opposition to the faith we profess. It is in the nature of our desire to follow the ways of God, and in our seeking to bring about something of His Kingdom here on earth, that we’ll encounter spiritual opposition, in the form of the Enemy. In Jesus’s words in John 10:10, “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full. The thief [-the enemy-] comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”

So, this morning, as we consider in the story of Nehemiah what it is to encounter opposition, we do so recalling all those in many parts of the world, where to profess that Jesus is Lord is to face a very real risk of death, imprisonment or persecution. Let us hold them in prayer now, in a moment of silence, praying especially for their safekeeping.

Let’s turn to the detail of Nehemiah’s story, and to chapter 4, where we find a name cropping up again from earlier in the Book. Back in chapter 2, right at the very start of the rebuilding of the walls, Nehemiah named three figures, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, who mocked and ridiculed him and his fellow Israelites, as they began their task: why were they bothering to waste their time and energy rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls?

But by the time we encounter Sanballat again at the start of this morning’s reading, the picture’s changed substantially. Nehemiah and his fellow Jews have rebuilt the walls to almost half their original height. Sanballat, was a high-ranking official of the Persian Empire, in charge of much of the region around Jerusalem, who, with his cronies, felt threatened by what Nehemiah had achieved, even with this initial, partial rebuilding. If Jerusalem were restored to even a fraction of its former glory, then the power that Sanballat and Tobiah and their allies wield would shrink dramatically. So they react.

And they use all of the jeering insults that they can muster against Nehemiah and his fellow Jewish wall-builders. Sanballat criticises them in just about every way you can think of, to undermine and discourage all that they are doing.

He attacks their character – they are “feeble Jews”.

He attacks their abilities – “Will they ever restore their wall?”

He believes they’ll never finish it – “Will they ever get to offer sacrifices to the Lord in His Temple again?”

He attacks their stickability – Will they “finish in a day?”

He attacks the works’ feasibility – It’s impossible! How can those heaps of rubble be turned into walls once again? And then weaselly Tobiah pipes up, too, to attack their competence –even a fox would break down the wall, were it to climb up onto it!

Sanballat and Tobiah, in all their name-calling, which all the builders can hear from their stations on the walls, do their worst to discourage God’s people from the vision He has placed in their hearts.

Have you ever encountered this, I wonder? When you really feel that God’s placed a burden on your heart for a Kingdom purpose, and then you’re greeted with others’ ridicule, even as you do your very best to follow His calling on your life. It’s so easy to feel discouraged, isn’t it? To question ourselves; whether what we thought we’d heard from God was right in the first place; whether to throw in the towel right now…

This is just what happens to Nehemiah and his fellow Jews. And then it gets worse for them – when Sanballat’s taunts don’t seem to be having an effect, he tells the surrounding tribes about what’s happening with the walls; and they all gather their armies to come against Nehemiah, to destroy the new fortifications, and to slaughter the builders and their families as well.

This is the first form of opposition that Nehemiah encounters – hostility, mockery, and violence. But then there comes a second form of opposition, more insidious, and perhaps even more dangerous than the first sort: discouragement and fear.

We read in verse 10 of chapter 4 that, confronted by all of this, the Jews become tired; they feel that there’s just so much to do; they just can’t do what they’ve set out to achieve. And it’s so common for us to feel like this, especially in the middle of something big, when our initial enthusiasm has waned, but we don’t yet have the renewed energy and momentum that comes from having the end in sight. Apparently this is exactly what runners in Nottingham’s Robin Hood Marathon feel – between mile 13 and mile 22, the route goes out to Colwick Country Park and Holme Pierrepont, where the wind whips up, and the spectators cheering you on become thin on the ground, and it’s so easy to get discouraged; to feel like giving up.

And then other Jews - their allies from the towns and villages surrounding Jerusalem - say to them, not encouraging and strengthening words, but they too start to talk of throwing in the towel. “Leave all that hard work on the walls. Come with us to where you’re in less danger.” They think that they’re being well-meaning and compassionate towards the builders in Jerusalem, but their siren calls actually oppose what God had called the builders to do.

All of this opposition seems to have become too much. But Nehemiah responds, and he turns the situation around. How, I wonder, does he go about this, and what can we learn from him in our own Christian walk, individually and collectively, as he does?

Given what we’ve already seen of Nehemiah’s previous response, of prayer and action hand in hand; of his confidence in God’s sovereignty alongside human responsibility, it’s no surprise to see that his response to opposition is along the same lines.

Nehemiah’s first response is PRAYER. In verses 4&5, Nehemiah prays. But I think that his prayer can take us aback a bit – to be honest, it’s pretty brutal, asking God that He’ll send judgement on his - Nehemiah’s - enemies. So I think it’s important to say two things here. Firstly, it’s OK to express to God the full depth and rawness of what’s in our hearts. We can do so, knowing that God will not necessarily do what we ask Him to do, but that he does hear us, and he’ll respond to our prayers in His (often far more appropriate) ways. And, secondly, we can see in this episode that, although Nehemiah in many ways points us towards Jesus, this prayer is a reminder that Nehemiah is not Jesus. In contrast to Nehemiah, Jesus’s prayer to his enemies who nail him to the cross is “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do…” Nehemiah isn’t Jesus!

So, for us – as for Nehemiah - whenever we face opposition and discouragement, let our first response be prayer – whatever the circumstances. And, then, having prayed, Nehemiah ACTS. His response is intensely practical; he presses on, and in particular, does three things.

First of all, Nehemiah reminds the people who God is. In verse 14, he stands up in front of the crowd, and declares, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome!” At times like this, we too need to turn our eyes to God, and to the extraordinary things that He has done. So, reading in our Bibles the stories of His providence and love, and sharing the stories of Christian women & men who’ve gone before us, & of how God has moved in their lives – and, indeed, reminding ourselves of what He’s done in our lives, too.

Secondly, Nehemiah arms the people, and has them ready to fight. In verse 16, we read that sends some to be armed, on sentry duty. For the rest, still labouring, Nehemiah gives them a sword to wear at their side, or to carry in their hand, whilst they still carry their building tools.

What might this look like for us today? It’s clearly not appropriate for Christians to have whatever the tools they need to do their job in one hand, and an actual weapon in the other.

But if we remind ourselves - thinking of the famous image given to us by St Paul in Ephesians 6 – that our primary battle is against spiritual forces; the powers and principalities of this world, then we need spiritual weaponry. We carry not a sword of iron, but wear spiritual armour and carry spiritual weapons: the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; the sword of the Spirit. So, as we work with our trowel and our sword - that of the Spirit - at hand, we’re called to build God’s Kingdom; His church, as we pray.

So Nehemiah prays, and Nehemiah acts. And his actions are, firstly, to remind the people of God, and of all He has done for them. Secondly, Nehemiah places sentries on duty, arms them fully, and gives the builders themselves additional weapons with which to fight off the enemy. And, thirdly, Nehemiah keeps the people together!

In verse 22, we see that some of the villagers near Jerusalem had been offering to put up some of the builders. But Nehemiah, conscious that these villagers were exactly the same people who’d been trying to discourage the wall-builders, so there was huge scope for these workers to have their confidence sapped, if they were to mingle with these nay-sayers, in much less Spartan surroundings.

Nehemiah insists that all the people of the city are to spend the night in Jerusalem; all in the same place – don’t spend the night in a comfy village over there, with your friends – we need you here, with us! We need to stick together as a church, united, especially when we are faced with opposition to our work to build the Kingdom, guarding each other; fighting alongside each other; fighting for each other!

The story of Nehemiah gives us some incredibly practical lessons for what to do when we are faced in our walk with Christ, by opposition and discouragement. When we seek to take spiritual ground for the Kingdom of God, we can almost certainly expect spiritual opposition. And the greater the danger that we represent to the Enemy, the greater the opposition is likely to be.

So – as we continue in our Benefice Vision setting process over these coming weeks, dreaming together of how we can shine the light of Christ more brightly in our communities, and grow together in our faith and discipleship, it would be no surprise if we were to face opposition from the Enemy. But if, and when we do, let us respond with the wisdom and faith of Nehemiah, first in active prayer and then in prayerful action; reminding ourselves of what God has already done before us; arming ourselves with all of the spiritual weapons the Lord gives us; and unifying ourselves every step of the way. And, in so doing, may we do wonderful things, and bring people to Christ, to God’s glory, in this, our Cranmer Group.

In Jesus’ mighty name, I pray, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Patrick Newton**

Let’s bow our heads and pray to our Heavenly Father.

Lord we come to you now, confident that you listen to our prayers and provide all our needs. We start by praising you for your creation, for the wonders of the world all around us, for day and night, light and dark, and the joy of life that is starting to respond to the change in seasons. Thank you for sending your only Son to save us and for all that he taught us in his time on earth. Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit that breathes life into our faith and gives us strength when days are tough.

We think of your church on earth and ask that you bless the Queen, our Archbishops and Bishops and other leaders of your Church and give them wisdom as they guide your faithful. We pray for your church in the Cranmer Group, for Tim our vicar and all who support your faith in our villages. We especially pray in the coming weeks as we come together to explore and pray for a vision for your churches in this Group and for a way forward to grow the knowledge and love of you in this area. Give us the courage to imagine how we could facilitate a thriving Christian community here. Almighty God we recognise this will not be achieved through our own efforts but only as a Group, receiving your inspiration and support.

We thank you for Tim’s words today and for Nehemiah’s example as he responded to his enemies’ opposition to his plans with prayer, work, vigilance and focus on the Lord. May we also respond that way in the challenging months and years ahead as we fulfil your vision for the Cranmer Group.

Lord in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

Thank your Lord for the encouragement and hope we are all feeling from the successful vaccine programme. We continue to remember all those who have died from Covid, and for the many whose lives have been fractured by this crisis. We thank you for the hard work of the NHS and care workers, and those who developed vaccines. We pray that our country may carefully return to a more normal way of life but also maintain the positive connections that have been made between people and communities as we have supported each other through the pandemic.

Lord in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

We think of the world at this time of crisis. We ask your help in healing divisions and inequalities. We pray for wisdom and generosity for our world leaders so that they work together to solve the Covid pandemic and the climate crisis, but also to support poorer countries that need medical and vaccination support.

Lord in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for our children as they return to nursery, school and college next week. Give them confidence that they are safe and help them to enjoy finally meeting up with their friends again and starting to live a more normal life.

Lord in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill in our villages – help them to access all the support they need. Hear us in a moment of quiet as we remember those who have died ………. Grant us, with them, a share in your eternal kingdom.

Lord in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

Help us have the courage to awaken to greater truth, greater humility, and greater care for one another. May we place our hope in what matters and what lasts, trusting in your eternal presence and love.

**Merciful God, accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

 **Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation
Played by Deborah Davies**

Christ is made the sure foundation,
And the precious corner-stone,
Who, the two walls underlying,
Bound in each, binds both in one,
Holy Sion's help for ever,
And her confidence alone.

To this temple, where we call thee,
Come, O Lord of Hosts, today;
With thy wonted loving-kindness
Hear thy servants as they pray;
And thy fullest benediction
Shed within its walls for ay.

Here vouchsafe to all thy servants
Gifts of grace by prayer to gain;
Here to have and hold for ever,
Those good things their prayers obtain,
And hereafter, in thy glory
With thy blessed ones to reign.

Laud and honour to the Father,
Laud and honour to the Son,
Laud and honour to the Spirit,
Ever Three and ever One:
One in love and one in splendour
While unending ages run.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ give you the grace to grow in holiness,
to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him:
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you, and those you love, always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**