**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**March 14th - The Fourth Sunday of Lent**

**(Nehemiah Chapter 5)**

**“God Will Provide All We Need, and More”**

*Dear Cranmer Group Friends,*

*This Sunday, I’m delighted to be able to welcome Annie Dickinson, our Lay Reader, who’s preaching to us from chapter 5 of Nehemiah, continuing our Lenten journey through that book. Annie considers how the bread and wine shared between the people of Jerusalem prefigure God’s spiritual food for us in Word and Eucharist, and an encouragement to trust in God’s abundant provision for us all.*

*The passage also has strong themes of social justice, and of looking after those in the community who’ve been disadvantaged because of the inequitable distribution of basic resources. In these pandemic times, we’re especially conscious of the hardship that some in our wider community are facing, through no fault of their own. It’s been wonderful to see how members of our Cranmer Group family, and others from our six villages, have been pulling together to donate to, and to run, the Cranmer Foodhub, providing food parcels to those who are in real need. Thank you so much to all of you who continue to support this great initiative with your donations, and who volunteer in it, showing God’s love for our community in such a practical way.*

*May you too know His love for you, this week and always. God bless,*



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

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

God of love,
passionate and strong,
tender and careful:
watch over us and hold us
all the days of our life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Show Me How to Stand for Justice**

**Played by Deborah Davies**

Show me how to stand for justice,
How to work for what is right,
How to challenge false assumptions,
How to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
In a world so full of greed,
Showing your immense compassion
By the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
Whether given or received -
For my need has not diminished
Since the day I first believed;
Let me seek no satisfaction
Boasting of what I have done,
But rejoice that I am pardoned
And accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
Modelled on your living word,
In humility submitting
To the truth which I have heard.
Make me conscious of your presence
Ev’ry day in all I do:
By your Spirit’s gracious prompting
May I learn to walk with you.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 5
(New King James Version)**

**Read by Janet Greasley**

***Nehemiah helps the poor***

*Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’*

*Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’*

*Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’*

*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.*

*I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are charging your own people interest!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: ‘As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!’ They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.*

*So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them – one per cent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.’*

 *‘We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.’*

*Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!’*

*At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.*

*Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year – twelve years – neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. But the earlier governors – those preceding me – placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.*

*Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.*

*Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.*

**Sermon: “God Will Provide All We Need, and More”
Annie Dickinson**

Last week we saw that, in supporting and re-establishing the community and faith, the people were opposed and ridiculed from outside their community.

People said, “they’ll never succeed”, “this is worthless work”, “we’ll attack them and stop them… we may even kill them.” And we saw that their response was to:

* Trust God
* To pray and
* To press on… with the work he had established.

And in our time we also face opposition from *outside* – “What you do is pointless, worthless, irrelevant, you’ll get no support here. We may even oppose you”, and we may sometimes experience anger at faith. And it requires of us the same response: to trust God, to pray and to press on with the work that God has given us.

Today in Nehemiah we see that there is trouble *inside* the community. The community of faith is experiencing real hardship. There’s famine, families are struggling to survive, and they’re having to beg and to borrow. And perhaps even worse, it’s sometimes their own people, their own neighbours, and their own brethren, who are taking advantage of them when they are in need.

So the events we see in Nehemiah 5 are internal conflict, inequality – some have more than enough and others are struggling, and self- interest – those who are able taking care of their own needs, their own interests at the expense of their brethren. So you have conflict, inequality and self-interest.

So what’s Nehemiah’s response to this, Nehemiah ‘God’s comfort’ – that’s what his name literally means! How does God comfort his people?

Well, first of all he’s angry. It makes God angry because it’s in direct contradiction to all that he asks of ‘his own’. It’s in contradiction to his very character and nature; and it dishonours him.

And then Nehemiah ponders – he thinks ‘seriously’… and I’m sure he prays as well. He thinks about it before he acts. And then he acts – he rebukes the leaders, and he says to them “Have we experienced redemption – freedom from slavery, only to sell our people back *into* slavery!”

In our context it might be “Have we introduced people to the Grace of God, to God’s gift of freedom and life, only to return them to the bondage of the Law!”

He says, ‘we have a responsibility to God, and as witnesses to those around us – to un-believers. We need to change our hearts and minds and show God’s loving-kindness – his ‘checed’’ in our community. And the leaders agree to change how they are responding to the challenges in the world, to the famine. And we too are facing, and will face, immense worldly challenges – the ‘fruit’ of the pandemic. And perhaps we also in our time face a famine – a famine not of food but of faith.

So let’s look at what Nehemiah has to say to his own time – and to ours…

So first of all, in verse 2, the people are saying, ‘we’re starving; we’re starving for grain – for bread. We need grain; we need bread, so that we can live.

As Christians, who understand God’s New Covenant, there will also be people who will be saying, and are saying, “I’m struggling with my faith in these days.” People who are doubting God’s promises; people who are uncertain and anxious about the future. And many who will be saying “Who was this Jesus anyway… wasn’t he just a really good man, and a really great ‘role-model’ for us to follow?” “And what is this ‘bread of Life’ that you talk about?”

- So what do we have to say to those doubts and anxieties today?

- Are we giving each other the ‘bread that brings Life – and Life in all it’s abundance?

Secondly, in verse 3, there are others who are saying, “We’ve sold, and we’ve given up our land and our vineyards in order to cope with this famine.” ‘This famine is causing us real problems; and the reality of this world around us. We’re putting our faith in the world, and putting our faith in the world to solve these problems. God is either absent or dis-interested.’

And the ‘New Wine’ speaks of the new Covenant promised in the Book of Jeremiah and fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. It speaks to us of life in all its fullness, for this life and eternally (See Luke 22 and Jeremiah 31).

And in Psalm 104 David says that it’s the “wine that brings joy to the heart”

And Nehemiah later says, in this passage “Give them back this ‘new wine’”. Verse 11.

So we can ask ourselves:

- How are we encouraging those who are looking away from God as the answer to the challenges we are facing; who’ve given up on expecting God to perform miracles; who don’t even expect him to be particularly interested in our daily lives, our daily challenges?

- And are we looking to God to inform our lives, or are we relying on our own intellect, our strength and our own abilities?

 And thirdly, in verse 4, others are just feeling completely overwhelmed by the demands that they find themselves faced with – tax, slavery to the world. “Our silver” they say “is tied up with paying tax. We have nothing to give.”

In our context this might be that all our worries and all our energy is being focused on things like financial concerns, and all the practical obstacles that we think we face.

Interestingly, because it specifically mentions that ‘other people own our vineyards’, perhaps it speaks to us directly today about our concerns for our internal finances – justifiable concerns and yet, as we see in Nehemiah, these are all concerns that are side-tracking people, taking their eyes from God and his ability to confront all the obstacles that we face.

And finally in verse 5 the result of all of these worries and needs, all the things distracting and limiting our faith, being so overwhelmed by what’s going on around us and the mountain of challenges that its delivering, that they feel powerless.

“This is not” they say “in our power, the land is no longer ours.”

So, in our context it might speak to our sense that all that we face is just too big, too overwhelming, and where is God anyway in all of this? But remember that is ‘God’s Comfort’, so what has he to say to us?

Well, we’ve seen that first he’s angry, he’s angry that we should be in such a state; that we have no food – in our terms no spiritual food.

Then he ponders, he gives it serious thought before he acts. Because then he acts…

So what does he do?

He calls the leaders together and he says to the, effectively, “We’ve put all that we have, all of God’s provisions, into bringing our people together. Are we now going to abandon them to their fate? Don’t we have a responsibility to demonstrate to those around – all the unbelievers, all the scoffers (in our terms it might be all of those outside our church communities) that we actually revere and trust the Lord?

“So” he goes on to say, “let’s be generous with what we *do* have. Let’s give our people bread and new wine.” For us we would understand this, both in Old Testament and New Testament terms, as giving people the Bread of Life - Jesus, and new wine - his Spirit that flows within us and produces in us peace and joy. “Finally, Nehemiah adds, “And let’s make a commitment, together, to do this.” And they do.

And so, for the next 12 years they fed themselves form what they had.

They continued to work together to rebuild, and to encourage each other.

They actively welcomed anyone who wanted to come and eat at their table, be part of them and join with them.

And they gave thanks to God that, perhaps miraculously in a time of serious famine and need, they had sufficient.

And so perhaps Nehemiah’s message, God’s word of comfort to us, might also be:

- Don’t be distracted or dismayed about what’s happening around you.

- Feed from God’s table and chew on his Word.

- Work together in rebuilding, and encourage one another.

- And both expect from, and thank God for his provision; that we will have enough. We will have all we need, and more.

And again we remember the example of Jesus feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000. The message being that God provides for his followers – all that we need at the time, with plenty left over.

So let us not be distracted or dismayed about what’s happening around us. Let’s feed from God’s table and chew on his Word. Let’s work together in rebuilding and encourage each other. And let’s both thank God for, and expect, God to provide all that we need and more. Amen

**Intercessions**

**Led by Richard Marquiss**

Let us pray.

Father God, we live in troubling and confusing times. We are cheered and encouraged by the unrolling of the vaccination programme, and by the apparent reduction in Covid problems, and we thank you for all those people involved in this healing process. However, we still grieve and mourn for those who have been so ill with Covid or who have died, in the sad knowledge that people are still becoming ill and are still dying in this country and all across the world.

In trying to make sense of this, Lord, let us remember that it is alright for Christian people to own up to feeling scared and vulnerable and disheartened by events and - like the Psalmist to cry out "How long, O Lord...How long?" We remember this in the sure confidence that God will always listen to us, always understand and always love us.

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

Dear Lord, we ask for your blessing on everyone in the Cranmer Group, as we look towards the future and try to imagine how things might and could be. Help us to do this - not as six separate churches, but as one unified Christian community - one in hope and doctrine, one in charity. We ask for your blessings on Tim, the Benefice Council and the Ministry Group as they work together in this task of rebuilding, but as with Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls, this is a task for us all and each one of us will be able to contribute something however small.

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

Lord, we thank you for our six villages, for our family, friends and neighbours and the help and encouragement that they give us each day. We thank you for the early signs of the returning spring. We ask for your protection upon the children and young people of our villages, now that they've returned to school. Keep them and their teachers safe and well, Lord, and happy to be back in familiar surroundings.

We think in love, Lord, about those who we know who are ill at present in body, mind or spirit. We ask you to be with them and to uphold them in their troubles. In a moment of quiet let us name before God any who we are thinking about at present......

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

Finally Lord we pray for ourselves. Help us to be faithful people in the coming days, trying hard to offer a Christian example to others in our words and in our actions and in our generosity. And, during this season of Lent, let us try to think about our lives and our private world and how we can improve them so that they are more consistent with our professions of faith as followers of Jesus. Help us to try our hardest, Lord...we can do no more.

We ask all these things in Jesus’ name.

**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 Fourth Sunday of Lent
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.
**Amen**

**Hope and Glory (by Tim Hughes)
Played by Deb Hubbard**

Hear our cry, oh King of heaven,
Jesus hope to every heart;
We are lost without Your glory,
We are lost without You, God.

Be the fire, that burns within us,
Flames of love that purify;
Send Your power and Your salvation,
Let us see Your Kingdom come.

Only You can move the mountain,
Only You can heal our land;
Christ alone, our hope and glory,
Christ alone in You we stand.

Turn Your eyes and show us mercy,
How we need Your Father's love;
Lead us home, and out of darkness,
With Your gospel, burning bright.

Only You can move the mountain,
Only You can heal our land;
Christ alone, our hope and glory,
Christ alone in You we stand.

Only You can move the mountain,
Only You can heal our land;
Christ alone, our hope and glory,
Christ alone in You we stand.

We believe our God is mighty;
We believe our God is here;
We believe our King is coming;
Christ alone in You we stand.

Praise the Lord, our God is mighty;
Praise the Lord, our God is here;
Praise the Lord, our King is coming;
Christ alone in You we stand.

Only You can move the mountain,
Only You can heal our land;
Christ alone, our hope and glory,
Christ alone in You we stand;
Christ alone in You we stand.

**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.**