**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**March 21st - The Fifth Sunday of Lent**

**(Nehemiah Chapter 12, verses 27-43)**

**“Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart”**

*Dear Cranmer Group Friends,*

*This Sunday, I’m delighted to be able to welcome our good friend, Rev. Peter Watkins, whom many of you will know especially from Café Church. It’s great to have Peter with us, giving us his wisdom about how we worship the Lord. Looking at Chapter 12 of the Book of Nehemiah - when God’s people celebrated completing the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem - Peter shares with us how we are called make our worship of God joyful, holy, and sacrificial.*

*This coming week we too turn our eyes towards Jerusalem, so to speak, as we begin to think about Jesus’s entry into the Holy City on Palm Sunday, and the events of Holy Week. I’m very conscious that we’ve not yet communicated with you all about what our service pattern for Holy Week and Easter will be, since we’re waiting for official guidance as to what we can do in terms of physical gatherings, whether in our churches or perhaps in our churchyards.
As soon as we have definitive information, we’ll let you know. Thank you all for your patience – I hope I’ll have good news for you!*

*With my love and prayers to you all in the meantime,*



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

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

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world,
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour’s blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen.**

**Take My Life, and Let It Be**

**Played by Sarah Hadfield**

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold;
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine;
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart; it is Thine own;
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure-store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 12, verses 27-43
(New King James Version)**

**Read by Caroline Coulter**

***Dedication of the Wall of Jerusalem***

*At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem – from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.*

*I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, towards the Dung Gate. Hoshaiah and half the leaders of Judah followed them, along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zakkur, the son of Asaph, and his associates – Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani – with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God. Ezra the teacher of the Law led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the site of David’s palace to the Water Gate on the east.*

*The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people – past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.*

*The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests – Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets –and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.*

**Sermon: “Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart”
Rev. Peter Watkins**

Good morning! It's good to be with you again. Hopefully the next time that we meet, I'll be able to see your smiling faces in front of me in person. I've missed it; I know you have as well.

When my kids were growing up, one of their favourite television programs, amongst many, was The A Team. And, if you remember, the catchphrase for that was, “I love it when a plan comes together!” We've been hearing about Boris's Roadmap Plan, and the vision of what life would be like after lockdown, when we'll be able to have BBQs in the garden, celebrations of birthdays, parties, school sports days, football matches, holidays, family meals, thanksgivings of all description. A time when the ICU beds will be empty, and COVID will be on the run. And it's a team effort - as Boris keeps reminding us, we're all involved in doing that.

Well, as we've seen over the past few weeks studying that book of Nehemiah, turning a vision into a reality is a journey that is fraught with difficulties. But with faith, determination, sacrifice and hard work of so many people, the end is in sight. The end hopefully is in sight for us with this COVID pandemic. But the end also was in sight for Nehemiah, in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. His journey has taken him from being cup-bearer to the king, as a captive Jew in Babylon; of hearing about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and how it’s fallen into disrepair; how he managed to enlist the support of the king; and going to Jerusalem and starting to rebuild. A work of moving huge blocks of stone and huge bulks of timber, facing ridicule and corruption from those two arch enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah.

They had also, as we heard, been reminded of why they're doing this by the reading of the Law. And, at last, the vision has become a reality. They have once more become a worshiping community, with God at the centre. How inspiring is that? It wasn't about the building *per se*, but rather what the walls and the gate stood for - the sovereignty of God.

Maybe it's the same for us? Perhaps lockdown has helped us to see that that, as Christians, it's not just about the buildings, special though they are, but about being God's people in the situations and the environments we find ourselves in, building a loving, caring, cohesive community.

And so we come to Chapter 12 of the book of Nehemiah: the dedication of the newly restored walls and gates of Jerusalem. Over my 40-odd years as a minister, I attended countless such occasions to celebrate the completion of many different projects. The most bizarre one was where I accompanied the Bishop, as Area Dean of Rugby, to dedicate a composting toilet outside a village church near Leamington Spa! Also, bizarrely, celebrating the coming of electricity to a village church just outside Warwick. There have been many big occasions, removing choir stalls to accommodate drum kits and and amplifiers and suchlike. The installation of PA systems and audio-visual equipment. New roofs, church halls, complete re-orderings, removal of pews, carpeting, chairs - the list is endless! And they all had something in common: when the vision was completed, there was a service of celebration, usually accompanied by the Bishop.

A key factor in these occasions has not been the quality of the bunfight afterwards (although, in some villages, that’s something of a competition - who can put on the best spread!), but rather the quality of the worship, and the joy of the people. It's not about the *style* of worship, but the hearts of the people. It's not about organs versus bands - or harps, symbols, lyres and trumpets, as we have in Nehemiah Chapter 12, but about the *heart* of worship.

And in this chapter, we can note three principles about our worship. And we get these from the people celebrating the completion of the walls; the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem.

First, it was a *joyful* occasion. They were happy! They had put their backs into this; they'd worked hard: and their job was finished, in spite of all the opposition. Do you know that the word “joy” is used over 230 times in the Bible? And that's apart from “being joyful” and “joyfulness”! Verse 27 of Chapter 12 tells us that “they came to celebrate joyfully, with thanksgiving”.

When I was a child, I was dragged along to morning prayer - as many, perhaps, of you were - *and* evening prayer, where we had to intone, “Oh, Lord make us joyful”. And I remember, as a kid, looking around and saying, “They don't look very joyful to me - they look thoroughly miserable!” And I think most of them were, actually. And then there was an occasion when ‘The Pallisers’ came onto television. Suddenly, people stopped going to church in the evening! It was such a relief - they got more joy out of The Pallisers than they did out of evensong!

So, in Nehemiah, they really went to town! They had two choirs - two *massive* choirs. And, if you read the Chapter, one choir went around the walls *one* way; the other choir went around the walls the *other* way. And they all met at the Temple! There were so many musicians, and so many singers, that we’re told that they had to live in villages outside the city walls. It was a big affair! We're also told in that Chapter, that the rejoicing could be heard *miles* away. And when you do go to a big occasion - Spring Harvest, or New Wine, or any other big celebrations - you *can* hear that noise miles away; where thousands of people come together to worship God, with hearts and hands and voices.

In verse 43, we’re told that God “gave them great joy”. It was a gift; a gift from God. In Chapter 8, we read that “the joy of the Lord is your strength1” Happiness is an emotion; *joy* is a gift. In the minor prophet Habakkuk, we read this, in Chapter 3, verses 17 and 18: “Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor the fruit be on the vine; though the labour of the olive may fail and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herds in the stalls, I will rejoice in the Lord; I will joy in the Lord of my salvation!” And so, we have a vision, don't we, in Nehemiah? A great outpouring of thanksgiving and joy, for what God has done for them.

So we learn that our worship needs to be joyful. And *that* springs from an attitude of heart and mind, of giving thanks to God for what he has done for us.

But we're also told in this Chapter, that the worship was *holy*. The people “were made holy”. It's for God, not for us – in the song, We're Coming Back to the Heart of Worship, “It’s all about you, Jesus; not about me”. And we're told that the people confess their sins. And that's why we start our services, isn't it, with a confession? Perhaps sometimes we take that too lightly. But when we *can* come to God ask, for his forgiveness, and be assured of it, we are set free, we are made clean. We are a holy people, we are set upon for him. That's what “holy” means: set apart. And, as Christians, our joy comes from knowing that, when we come to God in penitence, we are forgiven.

There was a famous 19th century evangelist in Cornwall called Billy Bray. He was a tin miner. He was a drunkard, and a wife beater. And, one day, he came to know Jesus, and His life changed forever. He said this, “I can't help praising God, as I go along the street. As I lift one foot up, it seems to say, ‘Glory!’ And I lift up the other one, and it seems to say, ‘Amen!’ So they keep on like that all the time that I'm walking: ‘Glory!’ ‘Amen!’ If they put me in a barrel, I will shout ‘Glory!’ through the bunghole!”

To know *real* joy in our worship, we need to know the joy of being loved by God *unconditionally*, and *forgiven*, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And thirdly, our worship needs to be *sacrificial*. In other words, it needs to be costly; it's not cheap. It's not just about music and singing. Worship of Almighty God is so much more. It's about a whole-life sacrifice of praise. And that's costly; costly in time, gifts, energy, money. And the people in Nehemiah were generous with their time, their effort, their skills, and their money. They gave *so much* that they had to build *extra* storehouses for all the donations.

You see, giving is an act of worship. And the strange thing is - which many people can't understand - is that the more we give, the more we get. Because we are worshipping a *generous* God, and we are giving back to him *in thanksgiving*.

So, as we seek to build God's kingdom in our generation, in our villages, in our situations, in our family, in our communities, the *last* question should be, “Can I afford it?”

Can you afford *not*?

John 3:16, of course, reminds us that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In Nehemiah, the people caught the vision. And were prepared to give sacrificially. Not just generously, but *sacrificially* - it hurt to pay for it all. And there are many examples of this in our day and age. I've read of people mortgaging their houses, re-mortgaging their houses, to pay for the ministry of God's Church in many different places. And, when we look at the situation of Christians throughout the world, how can we *not* give generously to what God is doing; to support people where they need support?

And, of course, it's not all plain sailing is it? And we'll see that, next week, after the dedication of the walls and the celebration, things didn't go quite according to plan. Life, they say, is like a game of Pop-Up Pirates: that, once you solve one problem, another one comes along. But we have a God who is bigger than any of these problems.

Do you have a vision for the Cranmer Group, coming together in praise and worship and thanksgiving? Not just celebrating the end of the lockdown, although I hope we'll do that! But as a *permanent* way of living; of *being God's people* in the environment, in the place where we live and work.

Let's be *holy*!

Let's be *joyful*!

Let's be *sacrificial*!

*All* the time, not just one-offs, as we *constantly* celebrate what God has done for us all, in Jesus.

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 heard in the reading from Nehemiah today, let us too prepare to worship in holiness as Jesus taught us to, by freeing our thoughts from malice, deceit and hypocrisy. Let us mirror Christ’s sacrifice by loving our neighbours – through taking care of the world we have neglected so badly, leaving it better than we found it, and by living that sacrifice through care and compassion for those who live in poverty, in fear and in loneliness throughout the world. Let us bring Christ’s joy to the world though our own joy and thanksgiving.

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

We pray for justice and peace in our world. Give us social and political leaders of integrity, honesty and truthfulness, and help us to build a society that values every person, regardless of their colour, race or creed. Help those who struggle to find answers to the needs of the poor, the homeless and the refugees. At this time, help us to come together in unity to bring an end to the Covid pandemic, forsaking national selfishness and helping everyone to have access to vaccination

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 your love bring solace and comfort to those who mourn them. Let us all give thanks for NHS staff, for carers and for all the other quiet heroes who have worked so hard and often sacrificed much to help others throughout the pandemic. Let us strive for a just society where they are recognised for their good work.

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

We beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people; that by thy great goodness they may be governed and preserved evermore, both in body and soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

**O Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness!
Played by Deborah Davies**

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him: the Lord is his Name!

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
High on his heart he will bear it for thee,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
For truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the Name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ crucified draw you to himself,
to find in him a sure ground for faith,
and a firm support for hope,
and the assurance of sins forgiven;
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.**