**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**March 28th – Palm Sunday**

**(Nehemiah 13:4-14 and John 12:12-16)**

**“The ‘True’ Nehemiah”**

*Dear Cranmer Group Friends,*

*I hope that this finds you well. I have good news for you all too - we’re going to be meeting in our churches once again from Easter!*

*In the light of new Government guidance, we’ll be joining together in person to worship God on Easter Day, Sunday 4th April, as follows:*

*9.15am - Holy Communion, St. John of Beverley, Whatton
(indoor service; only the choir can sing; space is potentially limited due to social distancing, so please help us to welcome you better by reserving your place with our Administrator, Jade, on 07526 603766)*

*11.00am - Informal Service, St. Thomas’ Aslockton, with Easter Egg Hunt afterwards (outdoors; no need to book; all can sing – hooray!)*

*All our Cranmer Group churches are also open for Private Prayer on Good Friday, 2nd April. 12-3pm. A meditation on Christ’s Seven Last Words on the Cross will be available then, to guide your prayers.*

*And we’ll continue to be in our church buildings after Easter - details of exactly when we’ll be where will follow very shortly.*

*My prayers are with you, as we journey with Christ through Holy Week,*



**Rev. Tim Chambers
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The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for Palm Sunday
(Common Worship)**

True and humble king,
hailed by the crowd as Messiah:
grant us the faith to know you and love you,
that we may be found beside you
on the way of the cross,
which is the path of glory.
**Amen.**

**My Song Is Love Unknown**

**Played by Deborah Davies**

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour’s love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh and die?

He came from His blest throne
Salvation to bestow;
But men made strange, and none
The longed-for Christ would know:
But O, my Friend,
My Friend indeed,
Who at my need
His life did spend.

Sometimes they strew His way,
And His sweet praises sing;
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their King:
Then “Crucify!”
is all their breath,
And for His death
they thirst and cry.

They rise and needs will have
My dear Lord made away;
[A murderer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barabbas) they save,
The Prince of life they slay,
Yet cheerful He
to suffering goes,
That He His foes
from thence might free.

Here might I stay and sing,
No story so divine;
Never was love, dear King!
Never was grief like thine.
This is my Friend,
in whose sweet praise
I all my days
could gladly spend.

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah, Chapter 13, verses 4-14
(New International Version)**

**Read by Mike Senior**

***Nehemiah’s final reforms***

*…Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.*

*But while all this was going on, I - Nehemiah - was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.*

*I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, ‘Why is the house of God neglected?’ Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.*

*All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms. I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.*

*Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.*

**Gospel Reading: John, Chapter 12, verses 12-16
(New International Version)**

**Read by Jan Finlay**

***Jesus comes to Jerusalem as king***

*The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,*

*‘Hosanna!’*

*‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’*

*‘Blessed is the king of Israel!’*

*Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written:*

*‘Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey’s colt.’*

*At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.*

**Sermon: “The ‘True’ Nehemiah”
Rev. Tim Chambers**

Lord, I pray that you will be in my words, and in our hearts and minds this morning, and that you will use these Scriptures to point us to you, that we may be changed ever more into your likeness. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

I hope you’ve enjoyed our Lent journey through the relatively little-explored Book of Nehemiah. I hope, too, that you’ve found the story of the rebuilding of God’s city by God’s people, both challenging and inspiring, as we think about the renewal of our collective spiritual life here in the Cranmer Group; as we look to emerge from this very difficult last year, and the interregnum before that. We’ve seen the struggles that Nehemiah and the people of Israel had to overcome to achieve their goal; the ways in which they came together to do an extraordinary work for the Lord; the opposition that they faced, even as they did so; and - as Peter Watkins shared with us last week - the spectacular celebrations with which they marked the completion of Jerusalem’s walls. What a glorious note on which to end!

Except that it’s not. After the apparent final act, in Chapter 12, there’s still the epilogue of today’s reading, from Chapter 13. Those of you who are rugby fans will know the feeling – last weekend and then again this Friday evening, first Wales and then France thought that they’d finished the job. The eighty minutes were up; the clock was in the red; all they had to do was last a few seconds more; but first France, and then Scotland, had other ideas. What looked like glorious victories, turned into anguished and bitter defeats, with the final play of the match. It’s definitely not “a happy ending”.

At the end of chapter 12, when he returned to the Persian capital, Susa, to inform King Artaxerxes in person (as he’d sworn to do) of all that he and the people of Israel had achieved in rebuilding Jerusalem, Nehemiah must have thought that that would be the end of a glorious story. But we know, tragically, that it’s not.

It’s all rather like the Sorcerer’s Apprentice – whether you know the story from its original poem by Goethe, the music by Dukas, or the animation from Disney’s Fantasia, with its swirling mops and buckets. Whilst Nehemiah the master is away from Jerusalem, forces run out of control.

All that Nehemiah had done with - and for - the people of Israel began to unravel. It was as if they’d forgotten what had caused their ancestors to be defeated, enslaved and exiled over the course of the previous 150 years; they failed to keep their promises to God this time as well, just as they’d done throughout the years when they turned away from the Lord to other gods; ceased to trust in Him; and no longer followed His ways.

So what do we see is happening in Jerusalem once Nehemiah is no longer there to lead the people in the ways of the Lord – what he himself finds out when he’s at last able to return to the city? Our first reading gives us a small snapshot of some of the ways in which the people had turned away from God, and from his plans for them.

First of all, Eliashib, the High Priest himself, had allowed some of the rooms in the Temple, no longer to be used for storing the people’s offerings of grain, oil and wine. So, many Levites and musicians who’d been in Jerusalem to serve in the Lord’s House, didn’t receive basic foodstuffs, and were forced to leave the city and return to their villages, where they could provide for themselves. But worse than this, Eliashib had actually given these rooms in the Temple itself – God’s House - to Tobiah, whom we came across right at the start of the Book, as one of Nehemiah’s sworn enemies, who sought to do all he could to thwart God’s plans for His people and His city, by gathering military forces against Nehemiah, and seeking to sow disillusion and despair amongst the Israelite builders of the wall.

If we were to read on after the extract from Chapter 13 which I’ve chosen for today, we’d also see that the people of Jerusalem had ceased to observe the Sabbath as God had commanded them - they no longer trusted that the Lord would provide for them in the way He’d promised - and additionally that many Jewish men were choosing to marry women from Moab, Ashdod and Ammon. It’s important to say that there was no racial condemnation being made here, but rather that, in marrying in this way, the men were at risk of being persuaded to turn to their wives’ pagan gods, rather than remaining faithful to the Lord and His ways. All in all, it’s a pretty desperate situation to which Nehemiah returns. The dream had turned sour.

But, true to form, Nehemiah sets about reversing all of these ways in which the people had turned from the Lord. He throws out Tobiah, and cleanses the House of God (echoes, of course, of Christ driving out the moneylenders from the Temple courtyard, and upending their tables in disgust). Nehemiah re-institutes the correct storage of provisions, so those involved in worshipping the Lord are able to return and lead the people in this once more. He stops the merchants buying and selling on the Sabbath; and clamps down on marriages to non-Jews. He’s able, at least for a time, to set God’s people back on a path to right living with the Lord.

But Nehemiah cannot keep doing this ad infinitum. You get the impression that, if ever he were to have to leave Jerusalem, exactly the same thing would happen all over again – the people would turn away from God, and Nehemiah would have to return to bring them back to faithfulness to the Lord once more. And, of course, there would come a point at which Nehemiah would simply no longer be around any more, to do that.

So we end up, at the conclusion of the Old Testament - because Nehemiah, although not at the end of the Old Testament as its books are ordered in our Bibles, is chronologically the last book - without ‘a happy ending’ for the people of Israel. Everything looks pretty bleak.

Nehemiah had been an extraordinary leader for them. He loved God’s people – so much so, that he was prepared to give up his position of privilege, and throw himself into an extraordinary venture far from home, all for them, & for God’s glory. Nehemiah trusted his Heavenly Father – he knew that God knew what He was doing in all of this, and that He is faithful to those who love Him. Nehemiah knew where he was going – right at the very start of the book, he developed a vision; he planned over a long period of time; he gathered people around him; and then he laboured with them to bring it to fruition. And, finally, Nehemiah was willing to give everything that this vision might come to fruition. But all of this, ultimately - for all the persistence Nehemiah showed, and all the achievement and celebration - was not enough.

However, we see in the person of Nehemiah, and in this Old Testament story, a pointer to the people’s need for “a ‘better’ Nehemiah”; “the ‘true’ Nehemiah”; the one whom we see entering, four hundred years later, on the back of a donkey into this very same city of Jerusalem, to meet his personal destiny: Jesus Christ.

On Palm Sunday, we see Jesus being borne into the city of God’s people; fêted with palm branches as would be a monarch, or a conquering hero. We join with the people today to celebrate Christ’s arrival in Jerusalem, with all of the others who had flocked there to celebrate the great feast of Passover, the commemoration of the Israelites’ defining story, of deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

We know that Jesus, through these actions, is fulfilling multiple Old Testament prophecies, and in particular that he’s the one who has come to be the saviour of God’s people - the Messiah; the one who will deliver them from their oppressors once and for all. But we also know that the kingship that Jesus embodies is unique. The rule of Jesus is that of the servant-king.

Like Nehemiah, Jesus’s heart broke for God’s people – he, too, loved them so much that he left his Heavenly Father’s side, that he could do extraordinary things for God’s people, and for God’s glory. Jesus, too, trusted his Heavenly Father, agonising as he knew it would be to do so – just listen to his prayer in Gethsemane, as he’s about to be betrayed. Jesus knew absolutely where he was going, and what he had to do to bring humanity back into right relationship with our Heavenly Father; that he would have to give his life in our place.

Nehemiah’s story with the Israelites is ultimately, for all the good that’s done, one in which he and God’s people will forever be stuck in a cycle in which goodness turns rotten; they repent; and then they recommit themselves to God - repeated and repeated, but without any ultimate solution or resolution. We, too, are stuck in that very same cycle. But Jesus offers to each one of us the chance to break out of it, once and for all, through the extraordinary grace of God, should we choose to repent of what we’ve done wrong, and recommit our life to him.

In Jesus, there is hope when we *fail*. He is our advocate with his Father, our Father, when we mess up – God sees the person of Jesus before him, not us. Nehemiah, in chapter 13, verse 22, pleads with God, “Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me, according to your great love.” Jesus, as he hangs on the cross, in effect says to his Father, “Remember me for this, my God, and show mercy to *them*, according to your great love.”

In Jesus, there is hope for the *fight*. The Christian life is often spoken of as being a battle - think of the military metaphors that St. Paul famously uses in Ephesians 6 – but Jesus doesn’t leave us to battle it out against sin and death on our own. Whilst Nehemiah returned to his king in Susa, Jesus has returned to *the* King in Heaven. But, unlike Nehemiah, Jesus doesn’t leave us alone when he did so – he has left with us his Holy Spirit through whom, even though we keep on failing, we are becoming more and more like Jesus through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work in each one of us.

And, finally, in Jesus, there is hope for the *future*. Like Nehemiah coming back to Jerusalem, Jesus too will one day return. And whilst he’s already - through his death on the cross and resurrection – definitively broken our repeated cycle of sin and repentance and recommitment, one day he will return, and put an end to it once and for all. And the city to which he points us then is not the flawed, ruined-but-rebuilt earthly city of Jerusalem into which he rode on a donkey, but the perfect Holy City of the Book of Revelation – the New Jerusalem, in which there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain.

So, as we say farewell to Nehemiah this morning, and we hold onto all of the good things that his story of vision and determination, courage and prayerfulness, have shown us, let’s above all remember this. For all of his Godliness, Nehemiah’s ambitions were always ultimately doomed to fail – it can never be anything other than this, in the human. But in the person of Jesus, the King who came not only to serve, but to save, we already have the ultimate victory that was denied to Nehemiah, through the eternal hope we share in Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. In his mighty name we pray, Amen.

**The Giving of Palm Crosses**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during Lent we have been preparing by works of love and self-sacrifice for the celebration of our Lord’s death and resurrection.

Today we come together to begin this solemn celebration in union with the Church throughout the world. Christ enters his own city to complete his work as our Saviour, to suffer, to die, and to rise again.

Let us go with him in faith and love, so that, united with him in his sufferings, we may share his risen life.

We hold up our palms crosses as we join in prayer:

God our Saviour,
whose Son Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem as Messiah
to suffer and to die;
let these palms be for us signs of his victory
and grant that we who bear them in his name
may ever hail him as our King,
and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Sarah Hadfield**

God of heaven and earth, we pray in these times of isolation, cut off from our loved ones, distant from our friends, away from our neighbours. We thank you that there is nothing in all of creation, not even coronavirus, that is able to separate us from your love.

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

Creator God, as we see the disquiet and sadness in the world, we pray for healing among the nations. For food, where there is hunger; for freedom, where there is oppression,; for joy where there is pain. We pray that your love may bring peace to all your children. We pray for all refugees living in difficult circumstances, for Alexei Navalny, wrongly imprisoned and all those people living under oppression in places like Hong Kong, Myanmar, Syria, Sub Saharan Africa and many more. Give them hope and encircle them in your loving arms

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

Lord remembering last Tuesday and the 126,172 people who have lost their lives from the virus, we pray for them and their relatives who are grieving for them. We pray for the medical staff who have worked so hard in difficult circumstances. Give them strength and courage to come to terms with all the problems they have coped with.

We remember the words of Captain Tom, “the sun will shine on you again, and the clouds will go away”.

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

Lord we pray for the Queen and the Royal Family. Especially for the Duke of Edinburgh, we hope that he is making an uneventful recovery.

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

Creator God, be near to us when we are uncertain, offer us comfort when we are afraid.

We give you thanks for all the good things in our lives, but we ask for help for things that aren’t so good. We pray for our community in the midst of this pandemic - that everyone would stay safe and healthy. Look after Ginny, Harry and Marley and take especial care of them.

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

A final prayer.

Dear Lord, We want to take a moment not to ask for anything from you, but simply to say thank you, for all we have.

**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 Palm Sunday
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.
**Amen**

**Ride on, Ride on in Majesty!
Played by Deb Hubbard**

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hark, all the tribes Hosanna cry.
O Saviour meek, pursue thy road
With palms and scattered garments strowed.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die:
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin
O'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
The wingèd squadrons of the sky
Look down with sad and wondering eyes
To see the approaching sacrifice.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
The last and fiercest strife is nigh.
Thy Father on his sapphire throne
Awaits his own anointed Son.

Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die.
Bow thy meek head to mortal pain;
Then take, O God, thy power, and reign.

**A Closing Blessing**

May Christ,
who accepted the cup of sacrifice
in obedience to the Father’s will,
keep you steadfast
as you walk the way of the cross
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.**