

Love Inverness

Nehemiah 1-2:5

I love Inverness. I love living here. It's a nice town to live in, and there's beauty in and around it that doesn't take long to get to. People say it's a great place to bring up a family, and I reckon that's true. Good schools, not too busy, not too quiet.

We're really blessed with some of the resources we have here for leisure, retail, healthcare and support services. And there's a generally friendly, hospitable culture here which a lot of us really appreciate. It's a growing city, with growing churches, too, who are growing in unity, and that's nice to be part of.

But Inverness is broken. The Highland Food Bank was running low on supplies over the summer, such is the increasing need for it. Some of the stories of our homeless people are tragic and shocking. Last year a poll declared Inverness to be Scotland's 'most unfaithful city' based on data about people using 'cheating on my spouse' websites. There's prostitution, alcoholism, family breakdown and uncontrollable debt leading to people losing their homes - and all of that's not just in our town, but in our *parish*.

Does it bother you? Are you stirred by the ways that the place we live is vulnerable, cold, naked and in need? I said to begin with that I love Inverness. But as every disciple of Jesus learns from Him, love's not just an affectionate feeling. It's a committed, sacrificial pouring out of self to bless, heal and restore that which we love. So do I... *love* Inverness? Do you? How?

How do you love Inverness?

Nehemiah describes the events at the end of Old Testament history. There's lots of Old Testament books that come after it - books of poetry, wisdom, prophecy - but this is the last chapter of the narrative of the people of God in the pre-Jesus part of the Bible.

Before this book has come the creation of everything, the fall of humanity into sin and out of relationship with God, the choosing of a family to become God's people, that family becoming a nation to belong to God, that nation being redeemed and brought out from slavery and established, then living under variously imperfect kings to rule them - all the time with the promise

that from these people would one day come the *true* King who would both rescue and lead God's people - the Messiah.

Then those kings and God's people so messed up, lived so unfaithfully to the God who had adopted them, that they were exiled. Invading nations overran their land and deported God's people to foreign lands. Then after some 70 years, the people of God began to return to Jerusalem. A shattered, broken shell of what it once was. The temple of God, which had been destroyed in the invasions, was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra. But the city was still in tatters.

After this book comes the 400 year silence between the end of the Old Testament, and the announcement of the angels that this true King has been born in Bethlehem - God Himself with us. So Nehemiah's a crucial link in the story. God's raising him up to rebuild and restore and retain a remnant of God's people for the Messiah to be born amongst. And it all started with Nehemiah's genuine, sacrificial love for the place he came from.

The news from home in vv.2-3 was that people were 'in great trouble and disgrace.' The broken down walls Nehemiah hears about are not the rubble from the invasion that led to the exile. Actually, some rebuilding work had already happened. Renewal in the place had begun, under the orders of previous Persian kings - we read about that in the books of Chronicles.

It was actually the king Nehemiah served the wine to, Artaxerxes, who gave the order to stop the rebuilding project half way through. He'd decided it wasn't in Persia's interests to let Jerusalem get all built up again. So a half finished job of restoring the city led to its enemies coming back and tearing the walls down again.

That's the news that Nehemiah is hearing - after the hope that something had begun, it hadn't been finished, and now it had all been knocked down again. The physical state of the place has led to people lacking both safety and dignity.

Our parish is not an area that needs urban regeneration, or gates put up because of crime. But between newsletter deliveries and friends who do work that involves home visiting, we know that there are homes that lack safety and dignity. And beyond the physical, there are plenty of people experiencing a lack of safety and dignity in their lives.

What bothers *you*? I don't mean about your own circumstances really - as a church and as your pastor we want to know about that to love you and help you and pray for you, but that's not what we're talking about today. What is it that bothers you about brokenness in Inverness? What has God laid on your heart as a burden, a 'that's not how it should be; and that's not how it *would* be in God's Kingdom?'

It could be about people around you, or groups of people in particular circumstances or stages of life. It could be a specific place here - an area in town, a school, a workplace. What's quite likely is that the thing that keeps bothering you about the brokenness in this place is something you assume we all see and think about. But what's also quite likely is that we haven't. God's given *you* that stirring, and it hasn't occurred to the rest of us the way it has to you. What's your burden and bother? And who else has it, I wonder?

I want to pitch our Missional Communities again. It probably sounds like a fad or the latest idea or programme. But at its heart is really this - hearing what God has said to us as a church about 'I see how widely you are serving this city, but you're too disparate.' Responding by praying, talking and sharing ideas. Finding the people who are bothered about the same brokenness. And setting off *together* with them, and anyone else who wants to join in, on a mission to do something about it.

What's your burden and bother? And who else has it, I wonder?

A minute to reflect on that

There's at least three things to learn from Nehemiah's response to the thing that bothers him about the brokenness. Three ways that he loves Jerusalem, that we can apply to loving Inverness.

Nehemiah loves Jerusalem by leaving things behind for it.

Nehemiah was living in the grandeur of Susa, working in a shiny sumptuous palace. He had access to the King of Persia himself. The trappings of his life were actually pretty good. But when he hears about how things are in Jerusalem, the love he has for that place and its people compels him to leave behind a place at the right hand of the King to head into all the mess and danger and confusion and pain and dirt and hard work and mortal threat to set about a mission of restoration.

Sounds like someone else we know, right? This is Christ like living. As much as Nehemiah gives up and risks, Jesus gave up more in love for you and me. He gave up the glory and perfect safety and dignity of Heaven to come to this world in all of its chaos and darkness and sin. To come to me in all of my chaos and darkness and sin. To not just risk death at the hands of enemies, but to walk towards it in all its certainty. Giving up and leaving behind, sacrificing all, in a mission to restore you and me to life with God, now and forever.

All of that has implications for how you live as a disciple of Jesus here in Inverness. You've thought about what bothers you - and if you don't have a burden yet, ask for one. So how will you love this place and its people in response? Well, part of that means asking - what do I leave behind or give up in order to love Inverness?

Not everyone has to leave their jobs and homes and country to go on the mission God has for them in another country (although, actually, some of us probably do). But how are you, as a disciple of Jesus Christ walking in His ways, making leave-it-behind sacrifices to be involved in the call God has for you in this place?

It might be a sacrifice of time, money, possessions, or something else. I suspect the biggest challenge to us is over time. We all lead such busy lives. But if our lives are too full to give time to mission in the thing God's made us bothered about, then our lives are too full. And the irony is, they're not really full at all - because life in all its fullness *always* includes being out intentionally on mission together.

So what's got to go? It will feel like a sacrifice, because it *is* a sacrifice. But a life including mission to the place God has us in is part of being a disciple of Jesus, and both Nehemiah and Jesus teach us that this mission involves a leaving-behind sacrifice.

What might you need to sacrifice in your life to go in mission to the brokenness you're bothered by?

The next thing to learn from Nehemiah about how to love your home town occupies much of chapter 1. And it will be interesting to discover how much of how you do this matches the way Nehemiah does it. Perhaps God will do some resetting and reshaping work in us through this next bit.

Nehemiah loves Jerusalem by praying for it.

Actually, even before the praying starts, there's the crying in v.4. And it transforms prayer to do that. When you sit down to pray, let the burden move you first. Dwell on it a while. Then you'll pray like you mean it. And when Nehemiah prays, he prays like so many of the prayers in the Old Testament that we could all learn so much from.

He starts by declaring the greatness of God in v.5. Pure praise, as he considers who God is - His residence in Heaven itself, His awesome power, His completely faithful character. He shapes his prayers and resets his heart around the kind of God we really have. Start with praise, and you'll remember who you're talking to. That'll give you a holy awe, a healthy hope, and a helpful perspective.

Then Nehemiah really calls God's attention, in v.6 and again in v.11 - 'Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, God.' He joins Old Testament Kings and Prophets in behaving just like little children in their prayers - 'Look, God, look! Look at this! Look at this! Look, God... GOD! Look here!'

When your heart is consumed with passion about the brokenness you're bothered by, you pray like this - like it won't do just to leave a message with God, but you need His attention *now*. Spread it all out, describe to God what you see, *show* Him what's bothering you.

Then it's time for some humility to go with the boldness. Confession time. But in vv.6-7, Nehemiah talks of what God has revealed in the written Word that God had given His people, a Word about how to live and worship faithfully to God. He reflects on how they've sinned, they've missed the mark and gone astray. He does that both for himself personally, and for God's people as a whole.

Are you keeping confession in your prayers? I confess, at the moment I'm finding it's the first thing to go in mine. Forgetting that there is an 'am I living the way God commands?' question to ask. When we pray, can I encourage us all to reflect on the ways we're missing the mark and sinning - as individuals, as a church, and as a city, too?

Next, Nehemiah focuses on remembering, in vv.8-10. There's a remembering for Nehemiah - looking back on what God has already done for His people and for the city in the past. And there's a calling on God to remember His people, His promises and His purposes for His people and His city. Might we look back with thanks to God for what He's done already in St.

Columba? In your life? In the churches all over this town? In the city as a whole?

And might we call on God to remember? Of course it's not that God has forgotten us because He's been terribly busy what with Syria and Brexit and all. But Nehemiah calling on God to remember the promises and the purposes for His people as they return to Him in dependent faithfulness is a cry to God to unfold those promises and purposes now.

'God, remember you told us to go and claim new land? We're here, we're ready to step forward, show us where to go.'

And finally, Nehemiah prays for God's enabling as he gets ready to do something about the need himself. I think this is different to what we often do. We see a need and we pray, 'God, do something about this.' We pray that He'll raise up people to do something about this. But we never dare imagine that we're the ones He's already raised up and given a burden to.

Nehemiah knows it's him. He's burdened, he's bothered and he's called. So he intends to do something to meet the need. But not on his own. He's going to need God's enabling, and in a very particular way. v.11 - 'Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.'

He's got to ask the King if he can go and rebuild Jerusalem. The same King who ordered that rebuilding to be stopped some time before. Well - wouldn't *you* pray for God's help if you were him?

But the thing is, maybe you *are* him. Maybe there's a brokenness here that you're bothered by that seems impossible to address. You know Nehemiah could very easily have thought, 'That's really sad about Jerusalem, but I *can't* do anything about it because the King would never agree to me rebuilding what he stopped rebuilding.' Have you done that? Written off your mission because you've spotted a reason it's impossible and thought no more of it?

What would need to shift for you to be able to do something about the brokenness? Can you picture what would need to change? Then it's time to pray for God to grant you success by making it happen!

Is there a specific circumstance you could pray would change so that you would be free to do something new for God?

The third and final lesson about loving our city comes in 2:1-10.

Nehemiah loves Jerusalem by taking opportunities boldly.

Chapter 1 begins 'in the month of Kislev.' Chapter 2 begins 'in the month of Nisan.' Four months have passed between Nehemiah hearing the news that burdened him, and this moment before the King where he takes action and asks the King permission to go and rebuild.

Some commentators read this as a 'before you dive in and act, spend much time in prayer' lesson. They'd suggest there's wisdom in preparing the ground in prayer for months before making a move in mission.

I don't know...

We're not told that was Nehemiah's intention. Other commentators suggest that the King was maybe away in a summer residence during these months, and this was Nehemiah's first chance to speak to him once he got back. That would explain why, four months after hearing the news of the desolation of his home town, the King's just noticing Nehemiah looking sad about it now.

What I see here in Nehemiah is a person who prays, 'day and night' as v.6 says, right up to and including the moment that the opportunity he's been praying for comes. I say 'including' because in 2:4-5, we read him offering that quick fire 'God help me' prayer that we all pray in the gulp moments, before he makes his big request.

There's been sat down, deliberate, regular prayer about the brokenness for months. There's quick fire 'God help me' prayers in the moment. But when the opportunity he's been praying for comes, Nehemiah loves his city by seizing it, and seizing it boldly.

When the King asks, 'What is it that you want?' Nehemiah *knows*, 'this is the opportunity I've been praying about.' So he goes ahead and asks the impossible 'Let me go and rebuild Jerusalem?'

Now, let's read vv.6-10...

Nehemiah gets a 'yes'! This is a 'yes' from King Artaxerxes, and also a 'yes' from the God he's been praying to for months. But there's more - sensing that God has made the impossible happen and has said 'yes', Nehemiah goes big, goes bold, goes for broke...

‘And perhaps, O King, you might give me official letters commanding the work to go ahead? And also, could I get unlimited free access to timber that you own to do the rebuilding work?’ When you realise that God is opening the door and saying yes, why not ask big? When the opportunity arises to enable your mission to the brokenness you’re bothered by, take it as fully and boldly as you possibly can.

That all starts with praying day and night, right up to and including that crossroads opportunity. But here’s the great thing about our God. He welcomes our bold approach to Him. Nehemiah had a King in Artaxerxes that he had to approach uncertain of whether he’d live or die by making his requests. But he also had a God that he would pray boldly to, with great confidence in the character of his God. And so do we.

We have a God who invites us to approach Him boldly. Who made it possible for broken, messed up sinners like us to do that, because He made the great sacrifice of Jesus’ body and blood for just this - that we can come to God. Safely, boldly, adventurously, dreaming big dreams and praying big prayers, knowing we will never be cast off, mocked or rejected because of it.

So whether it’s in forming missional communities together (as I hope you will), or it’s in going where God is leading you personally where you are - let the brokenness that bothers you rise to the top, bring it constantly and confidently in prayer to our God, right up to and including the moment that *you* seize the opportunity to set off in mission to do something about it.

Let’s go and love Inverness.