

How to mend a city

Nehemiah 2:11-3:32

Tearfund have specialised in helping communities all over the world to transform and rebuild themselves for years. I was reading stories this week about some of that work - equipping leaders to gather whole communities around new skills and resources in water and sanitation, to bring health and life to whole villages and towns.

Last week, we talked about just some of the ways that Inverness is broken, and about how God calls us to sacrifice for, pray for, and grab opportunities to love Inverness. But how do you mend a broken city?

Well, it's much like the ways God and His people are bringing renewal and transformation to communities across the world. God starts by raising up and equipping leaders who are burdened by brokenness. Then those leaders mobilise whole communities of people to join in with the rebuilding work.

We see this happening in Nehemiah 2-3. When we left Nehemiah last week, all of his praying and seizing his opportunity had led to a 'yes' from God and some surprising provision as he made the sacrifice to leave a palace to go and rebuild a city in rubble. And as we read through the rest of chapter 2, we see God mobilising a leader, who will in turn mobilise a community.

We pick it up in 2:11, where Nehemiah arrives. He enters the scene of brokenness, and sees it for himself. First of all, he stays for three days. Now, people can be in the habit of reading this as a reason not to get stuck in to the mission God has for them: 'It's best to spend some time just settling in to a place before presuming to bring about change... I've only just moved to Inverness... I've only just started coming to church...'

But let's be honest. Three days wasn't exactly a long time. Nehemiah would hardly have finished unpacking the luggage before he set about the work he knew he had moved here to do. He was doing what Ezra did just before him arriving in Jerusalem, and what Joshua did before them when God's people arrived in the promised land in the first place - taking three days to mark the moment with praise to God, then cracking on with what God had for them.

He didn't take any 'settling' time. The trouble with that, of course, is that if you're not settled, that's quite unsettling. Well, you might as well know now that setting about the Mission of God in this city is always going to prove unsettling.

Have you ever 'settled in' for too long? What happened when you did?

It's not that Nehemiah was gung-ho about the mission he was setting about. The following vv.12-16 are couched in caution and discretion. As he heads off to inspect the brokenness and assess the task before him, three times we read that he's doing this 'by night.' And twice he tells us, 'I didn't tell anyone what I was planning or doing.' Why's he so hush-hush about what's stirring in his heart and about inspecting these walls?

Well, there's good reason for secrecy here. Back in v.10, and again in v.19, we read about the opposition to the rebuilding work that's going to grow. Nehemiah needs to be discreet, because if word of His plans to rebuild got out, they'd be scuppered before he'd started. We won't all have to be so careful in our tracks to set about the mission that God's placed on our hearts. But, depending on what it is, some of us may need to be.

I'm delighted that God has responded to our prayers that He would raise up leaders for the Missional Communities we are beginning as a church. And I'm delighted that these leaders have responded with imagination and expectation about how the monthly communities they form can meet needs shown and make Christ known. Next door, you'll find details of four communities beginning from the end of this month, and the leaders of them that you can tell if you'd like to join in with it.

I'm also aware of 2, maybe 3 of us, who sense God putting something in our hearts to do for Inverness, but are still trying to discern more about what that is. As we go through vv.12-20, there's a certain order for all the leaders God is raising up to learn from.

First, you find out what God is putting on your heart to do for Inverness. In v. 12, Nehemiah says, 'I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.' As I've said, there were security reasons for that. But it does imply that this was a basically one-to-one experience between Nehemiah and God. That in the place of prayer, Nehemiah had discovered the burden God was giving him for his city.

Some of us know what that burden or idea or opportunity is, and it's come out in imaginative ideas, conversations between each other with similar passions where we sense God is putting things together. But some of us - including me - are at this stage of knowing that God's going to put something on our

hearts to lead, but needing to ask Him some more before we can speak like Nehemiah does in v.12.

Second, you scout out the work to be done. In vv.13-15, Nehemiah heads off to do just that. He's seen the broken walls from the inside; now he wants an outside perspective. To see how things look to those outside the city. How things look to those outside the community of God's people. He wants to understand the brokenness from every angle.

It may be that the nature of the work God is calling you to calls for discretion as you scout it out, much like Nehemiah by night. That might be because you *know* it will arouse opposition from the world around us. Or because it involves vulnerable people whose lives aren't to be tossed around some public discussion. If in doubt, a bit of quiet rubble inspection with no more than a couple of trusted people alongside you is in order.

Here's some questions to think through. Missional Community leaders, and those of us who are going to be - this is for you. But it's also for all of us who know that God's placed us somewhere that we can meet the needs shown and that we can make Christ known.

What's broken?

How would it look from where someone outside our church is standing?

How does what you're going to do bring restoration, salvation, security or dignity?

How would you describe all this to others that you want to join in?

That last question isn't hypothetical. Those that God raises up as leaders in mobilising mission to this city will need to know how they're going to share both what God's laid on their hearts, and what the work looks like. Because...

Third, you invite and challenge others to join you in the work.

Do you see how Nehemiah puts it in v.16? 'I hadn't yet said anything to those who would be doing the work.' There's all this quiet preparation of receiving something in the heart placed by God, then checking out the work to be done - but Nehemiah can *picture* and even *name* the people that he's going to draw alongside him.

Here's how he goes about it in vv.17-18.

He *describes the brokenness*. In v.17, Nehemiah uses the language that the people who lived in Jerusalem had used with him in 1:3 - ruined and burned, trouble and disgrace. He talks about it the way the city talks about it; not with exclusive jargon. And he's done his homework. He's got a full grasp of the brokenness God has burdened him with; he's heard how the people of the city describe it; he's seen it inside and out. And he talks about the extent of the brokenness and the challenge that is there knowledgeably and candidly.

After describing the brokenness, Nehemiah *shares a vision*. In v.17 - 'Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem... and we will no longer be in disgrace!' He offers them a daring dream of how things could be if they join in the mission together, and how life will be more as God intends - in this case, giving a city safety and dignity. There's a goal, there's a purpose, there's a hope to work for that he calls people to join him in.

Nehemiah wraps it up as he *encourages with stories of God's favour*. In v.18, Nehemiah tells the story from chapter 1 of how he'd prayed and prayed about asking the impossible of King Artaxerxes, and being given a 'yes' from God and a surprising 'yes' from the King, with more than he'd even really boldly asked for being provided.

No doubt as the priests and nobles and officials heard all this, they were reassured to know the Persian King wasn't going to execute them as rebels. But Nehemiah makes the bigger story to be 'the gracious hand of my God upon me.' He tells the story of how God is clearly in this, because of the really tangible favour and provision He's given.

As you're trying to draw others alongside you in God's mission, encourage them with the stories of God's hand in it. Are there stories of surprising doors opening or unusual provision for the work? Tell them! Tell them to the fellow Christians you're involving, and tell them to the others in the city who get involved with the mission too! Why not? It's all part of pointing them to Jesus who sends us out and makes us able.

So, for the leaders God raises up to mobilise people in His mission; first there's receiving something in your heart to do for Inverness; secondly there's scouting out the work; and thirdly there's inviting and challenging others to join you in it. The fourth and fifth things that come happen in response to what you've begun - and it's those who are with you and those who are against you.

Fourth, you strengthen the hands of those who are with you. In v.18, Nehemiah gets the people of the city joining in with him - 'Let *us* start rebuilding.' And a more literal translation than the NIV one here would read 'And their hands were strengthened to begin this good work.'

Elsewhere in Nehemiah and in the Old Testament, that phrase relates to being enabled for the work and being determined in the work. When you get a 'yes, we're with you' from people, help them to be enabled and determined. Given what they need to join in, and encouraged to commit to the work for the long haul.

Fifth, you respond to any opposition with confidence in God's calling. In vv. 19-20 we read about the opposition of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. That's going to grow, and we'll focus more on this in later chapters. For now though, let's focus on Nehemiah's response in v.20 - 'The God of Heaven will give us success.' Recalling God's call is Nehemiah's shield - remember the stories of surprising open doors and surprising provision? - this mission of restoration will not be defeated.

What has God put in your heart to do for Inverness?

Now you may have written off all that last bit and said, 'This is nothing to do with me, because I'm not a leader.' But there's two things to say about that - firstly, don't *assume* you're not a leader. Read through the Bible, and you'll find that almost all of the leaders God raises up for His mission don't ask for it; they're just given it. And some of the greatest ones - Moses and Jeremiah for example - really, really didn't think it was for them.

If there's something about which you're thinking or saying, 'I wish *they* would do something about this in the church,' remember what we said at our church day away - let's change our language from 'they' to 'we.' And what's more, if you're bothered about it, you're probably the one God is asking to take the lead in doing something about it.

The other thing to say is, sure, not everyone is going to be a leader mobilising the mission we'll set about as a church and community. But we all get to join in. Actually, we're all *called* to join in. Those villages, towns and communities that Tearfund are helping to bring transformation to - they're being transformed as the *whole community* gets behind the vision of the leaders who show them what they can build together.

We just read the first five verses of chapter 3. But read on right through that chapter, and you'll find the whole city joining in the mission of repair and restoration. Well, almost the whole city. There's a few nobles in v.5 who won't chip in. Not something to aspire to, that. Don't be the one known for not joining in with the mission. Everybody else, from the greatest to the least, gets involved. Tim Keller says this about chapter 3:

'What is extraordinarily impressive in this chapter, especially if you read it carefully, is that both men and women are working. You have both clergy and laity working. You have groups from different towns. You have groups from different [social] classes. You have groups from different trades. You have rulers and workers, goldsmiths and merchants and perfumers. You have representatives from virtually every part of society, and you have one phrase repeated over and over throughout the text: "next to him" (or "them").

You've got one group of people working on one bit of the rebuilding. And 'next to them' you've got another lot doing a different job. Families and groups of families working on the bit they're in. People in different parts of the geography of the city dealing with their patch. There's a little bit of specific skills and callings doing their specific work. But there's a lot more of, 'there's a job in front of us to be done, so let's just do it.'

Do you ever feel like mission for God is an overwhelming idea? There's so much to tackle! So much hidden and not-so-hidden poverty. So much injustice. So much loneliness. So much family breakdown. So much debt. So much broken health. And so many people who don't know Jesus and aren't yet in His Kingdom!

What really encourages me in Nehemiah 3 is that *nobody fixed the whole city, but everyone knew which part of the work was theirs*. And everyone knew that the whole mission was being fulfilled because they could see the others 'next to them' who were doing another part of the work. v.2 - 'The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them.'

Murray, Andy and the Project Team community restored homes and gardens in disrepair. And next to them, Sheena and the Knit and Natter community produced clothes for refugees. And next to them, Rachel and Gillian and the Walk and Talk community helped families to grow closer to each other and to other families on monthly walks. And next to them, Duncan and Eilidh and the Art community unlocked people's creativity and gave them a way to express what was going on inside.

And next to them, more communities formed. Communities to advocate for the voiceless. Communities building a culture of invitation to church. Communities that God is beginning to put together as He stirs leaders by putting something in their hearts to do for Inverness. And I find it wonderfully freeing to know that you're doing one bit, and next to you I'm doing another, and next to me he's doing something else, and next to him she's doing that...

I know that Missional Communities are not the be all and end all of God's mission to Inverness. But they are a way for us as a church - drawing others in the whole community into the work too - to know that we're working to mend a city in the name of Jesus, and to know that together we're rebuilding and repairing in different ways and different places to help build the whole.

So if God gives you something in your heart to do for Inverness, do all the stuff Nehemiah did in chapter 2. He's raising you up to lead, and Nehemiah shows you how. And as for all the rest of us, let's have no 'nobles who won't put their shoulders to work.' No passengers. No Christians who aren't interested in reaching and repairing Inverness.

Let's be people who, to a man, woman and child, say: 'I'm with you... and I'm next to you...' Which part of the mission will you set to? Which Missional Community leaders will you speak to and say, 'I'm with you; when do we start?' And as we all set about that, let's be encouraged by seeing and knowing that we are next to each other, building in different ways.

Our church logo is based on 1 Peter 2:4-5, where we read that Jesus is the Living Stone, the foundation of life to be built upon. But we're also like living stones, being built up together as a 'holy priesthood.' Do you know what that means? It means that all of us together, as God's people, are to bring God to the people of Inverness, and the people of Inverness to God. We're the ones, every one of us, with all our different shapes and ways we're made, to be involved in that mission.

So how do we mend a broken city? We ask God to place something in the hearts of a few. They step up to lead the way Nehemiah did. We find the places where we're going to say 'I'm with you.' And we take heart and encouragement from saying 'I'm next to you.'