

# Gathering a family around the work and the Word

## Nehemiah 7

Why did you come to church today? Why did you come to *this* church? For those who have been here for a while, why is it you keep coming to worship here Sunday by Sunday?

Is it a habit? A delight? A chore? A blessing? A stress? A strange mixture of all those things? I'm really, really pleased to see you all here today! But...

*Why are you in church today?*

I believe that through His Word in Nehemiah 7, God is saying to our church today, 'It's time to remember who you are. Whom I have called you to be, together, in this place.' Because this church, this family of God that you're a part of - we have been put together for a purpose by our Father at this time, in this place.

The Old Testament theologian Christopher Wright observes that by the time you get to the end of Old Testament history in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, there's a shift in the story of God's mission. The stories are no longer about charismatic individual leaders - like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, the kings - the stories are about the *community* of God's people. Building together. Serving together. On mission together.

And that trend then continues into the New Testament. The most charismatic leader in all history, Jesus Christ, although He is perfect and would get on with God's mission much more perfectly without us, chooses something different. He builds a church. I don't mean a building. I mean a community of faith in Him, a family of people given the Mission of God together.

And *that* is who we are. I believe that *this* family of God, *this* church of St. Columba, is not a random collection of people who happen to live quite nearby and are reasonably happy to keep gathering together. I believe that we are a family that God is putting together for the mission He has for us in this place. A family gathering around the work of God and the Word of God.

Nehemiah 7 is focused more on gathering around the work of God; next week Ken will take us through Nehemiah 8 and 9 and how gathering around the Word of God shapes all that for the community of faith.

What work has God given you to do? Here in Inverness? Here in this church and this community? The starting point for this, in vv.1-5, is to see that the work isn't something that you choose, but that God gives you. That means sticking with what He gives you until it's done. And it means letting go of it when it *is* done.

Have a look at vv.1-3. This is Nehemiah giving up what is not his to do. His job was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. What God broke his heart for in Nehemiah 1 was the safety and dignity of the city. He talked in 3:12 about 'what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.' We looked in that chapter at him sharing the vision with others to join in with him in the specific task of rebuilding the walls.

6:15 reports that this actually only took 52 days. Now, quite abruptly, the thing Nehemiah had poured his heart and soul and prayers and money and blood and sweat and tears into was... done. *Restoring* the dignity and safety of the city was complete. And Nehemiah knew that now, *maintaining* that dignity and safety was not his job. It was for others.

We see him hand it over to Hanani and Hananiah. Hanani, who cared so much about Jerusalem's safety and dignity that he'd travelled miles and miles to report the destruction of the walls to Nehemiah in the first place. And Hananiah, whom Nehemiah describes as someone who 'fears God more than most.'

Those of you who were here last week will remember what this 'fear of God' means - it's the desire to please God with your life above all else. As Nehemiah lets go of the thing he's poured so much into, he's really careful about passing it on to the right people. People who care about it as much as him. People who care about honouring God as much as him.

Is God calling you to let something go? Don't be too hasty to say yes here - this kind of talk does have the danger of raising the blood pressure for Donna and Vivien in their roles co-ordinating volunteers and serving rotas!

Actually, we can be quick to say 'I'm letting this go' because we're tired, when the job God gave to *you* is not done. And we can be quick to say, 'I'm stepping aside for someone else to do it' without any taking any thought or responsibility for finding who else *should* do it. Nehemiah's example challenges both those things. He sees it through to completion, and hands it over carefully.

But his example also challenges us when we're too slow to let go. When we know we shouldn't be holding the reins anymore, but because we're so emotionally invested we haven't handed over and made ourselves free for what God has for us next.

And that's the thing - God *does* have something new for Nehemiah to do. Come the end of v.3, Nehemiah's in a 'what next, God?' place in life. And in vv.4-5, he takes up the work that God is giving him to do next. And he goes right through the same process he went through back in chapter 2 - with eyes, heart and mouth.

His eyes are open to a new problem, a new need, in v.4. He sees that in this big, now safe city, the people are few and the houses are far between. The city needs people. To come in, to settle, to rebuild and cause the place to flourish. It's not currently the most attractive postcode. It's empty, pretty lifeless and being part of it means being pretty stretched because there's not enough people for all the work.

And then we get that phrase again in v.5... 'God put it into my *heart*...' It's what *God* has put on Nehemiah's heart as a burden, a mission, a vision, that he puts his time and energy into. Not whatever he fancies or thinks he's got time or skills for, but that which niggles at him and bothers him because God's putting that fire in his heart.

What God puts on Nehemiah's heart we'll look at more fully in a minute, but it's about gathering together a community of people who are willing to step into Jerusalem in faith to share in the work of building it up together. Gathering the 'up for it' people of God.

And he uses his *mouth* to speak that out. He shares that vision with the people that God leads him to speak to. He assembles them; gathers them to join him in the mission he has. The mission to bring fulness to an empty city.

What work is God putting on your heart to do? I'm not asking that hypothetically; because I know that He's answering that question for lots of us; I'm hearing that from some of you. And if you don't know that answer, can I ask you if you've asked God the question? 'God, what are you putting in my heart to do for you?'

What are the needs that niggle at you? In our church? Outside our church? What has God put in your heart about this need? Who else in the church sees the same thing and has it in their heart too? When you speak about

what God's put in your heart, you'll find that out. And then you'll find that God's probably putting you together to do something for Him.

Reflecting on these things, praying about them and talking about them with each other is going to lead to the right people sharing together in the Missional Communities we have, or forming new ones together. And the right people serving together in the many, many ways people do in our worship and gatherings together as a church.

*What has God 'put it into your heart' to do?*

*Is He telling you to hand something over - and if so, to whom?*

*Is He telling you to take something up - and if so, with whom?*

What God gives Nehemiah to do is to gather the 'up for it' people of God to go first in filling up the emptiness. In v.5, Nehemiah tells us that 'God put it in my heart to assemble... those who had been the first to return.'

Remember the context of the Nehemiah story - God's people had been exiled from Jerusalem and Judah because of their sin; their unfaithfulness to God. But the time had come where God was drawing His people back to rebuild. God was opening up the hearts and the wallets of the non-Jewish kings in power to say, 'Go, people of the LORD, and rebuild your temple of worship, and rebuild your city and community of faith in Him.'

Nehemiah had himself left the security, shelter and comforts of a palace to take up this opportunity. When the chance came to go to a building-less, fragile, broken place to help build it up and bring dignity and safety to people and glory to God, he led the way. Now, as he looked around the empty city that needed filling, God called him to gather the people who also had the faith to 'go first.'

In the accompanying book of Ezra 1:5, we read about those of God's people 'whose heart God moved' to be the first to go back to Jerusalem. Those who would leave behind what they had been settled in to set about the mission to build up Jerusalem as a place to worship God and become a light to the nations once again. They were bold enough to come before Jerusalem was all built up and bright and shiny, and when the sleeves needed rolled up.

What appears to have happened is that these returning exiles moved to the towns surrounding Jerusalem. We read it in Nehemiah 7:6 - some moved back into Jerusalem, but many others into the towns around it. All of these

people got stuck in with the arduous and dangerous work of rebuilding the walls with Nehemiah.

But after making the adventurous move to join in with going first, they settled in safer places nearby. Places that didn't feel empty and overstretched. Places where they didn't feel vulnerable to the attack that Jerusalem would face as a strategic target for the enemy. Places that were just more... comfortable.

In chapter 11 you'll find another full account of who settled in Jerusalem. In vv.1-2, it says this: 'Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. *The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.*'

Those who were *leaders*, and those who *made the choice* to be there, were commended. Because God's people recognised the sacrifice they were making to be there.

St. Columba Church, this is who you are. You are those who are *going first*. You're here now. Before there's a shiny building and lots more people and more comfortable income. Before popularity and security and attractiveness, and a dozen other things that will one day threaten to become false gods.

You're here now. When the people are few and the houses far between. When the sacrifice of time, money and energy feels great, because there are so few to share it. I believe that God wants to remind us today that this is who we are. The 'up for it' people of God. The 'go-firsters.' The leaders for those who will come in the years ahead. I believe God wants to commend you for being here, in this church, in these days.

I believe God wants to say, 'don't get scared and settle in nearby comforts. Come right in and get stuck in.' And I believe that God wants to gather more 'up for it,' 'go-first' people to fill this church family in this time. From all sorts of places. In the great big list of names we didn't read in vv.8-65, there are all sorts.

There's people from different family households in vv.8-25. Then there's those listed not by name, but by the place they came from in vv.26-38. That probably signifies people who were poor and marginalised - but they were full, numbered members of this 'go first' community.

Then there's lists of people with specific roles for the praise and worship of God in vv.39-62. This is a community of people whose identity and biggest motive was the worship of the LORD.

In that list, there's quite a few foreign names - people who once weren't part of God's people, who got to know the LORD through His people and became part of the family. vv.61-62 specifically number and include them - 'they didn't grow up in church, but they want to be part of God's family and set about God's work with us now.'

*'We are the 'up for it' people that God is deliberately gathering together to go first in filling up this church and this community.'* Do you see yourself and us with that identity?

There's four characteristics about this community of faith that God is leading Nehemiah to gather together. Four things that describe whom that family in Jerusalem was, and whom this family of St. Columba Church is.

First and foremost, *this family is safe*. God put it into Nehemiah's heart to make Jerusalem safe and secure; *then* to fill it with people who would build the city up together. When you come into God's city, God's family, God's Kingdom - you are *safe*.

Because of Jesus Christ, we are safe. Safe from God's rightful wrath for our sin, because Jesus took all that on Himself on the cross. Safe for eternity, because Jesus rose to break death for us. Safe in identity here and now, because you are above all else a child adopted by God, and nothing can take that away from you.

In this church family you are safe. You will not be mocked, chased out, or despised. You will be welcomed, loved and respected. You'll also be challenged to change and live in the light of God's will and ways. God does that, and so does His family. We'll see more of that in Nehemiah later on. But you are safe and secure here in the family of God.

Secondly, *this family is serving*. The people that Nehemiah gathered together to populate Jerusalem were 'up for it' people who put their hands up to go first and get on with doing the work of God together. There were no passengers, no people who were there just to 'be catered for.' Every one in that community had a part to play to enable worship at the temple of the LORD.

And every one amongst them had a part to play in rebuilding and filling up the empty city.

In this family called St. Columba Church, every one of us, young and old, male and female, married, single, rich, poor - is called upon to enable our gatherings for worshipping God. And that's more than just 'being around when I'm on the rota' - it's to *be* here, regularly and often, as all our members promise. To be here with one another and for one another, worshipping God with each other. And every one of us is called upon to find what God is putting in our heart for this city, find who else has that too, and fill the city up in that mission.

Thirdly, *this family is sacrificing*. The people who settled in Jerusalem put things aside to be there. They could have settled in more comfortable places nearby, but chose to come and be part of the exciting but costly mission of restoration God was building there. And it was costly. Those citizens of Jerusalem put something in to be there, too. Specifically, money.

In vv.70-72, we read about the generosity and example of the leaders amongst God's people giving financially to the work of God. In a nearly identical passage in Ezra 2, the focus is just on the leaders and what they gave. Here in Nehemiah 7, we see the leaders giving first and giving most - but we read about the rest of the people joining in. Everyone investing. Everyone putting skin in the game.

I know that your being here in this church family means sacrifice. Putting things aside - like being in another church where things are more developed, stable, more comfortable for you. Or time on Sundays and in the week that you used to use for other things, now given for worship and mission. And putting things in - including really sacrificial amounts of money to resource this work of God amongst us.

I know too, that our leaders really are giving first and giving most - and that we're all called to join in with giving financially to the church. In a few weeks, you'll hear more about how the leaders are giving first to the building fund when that opens, and the sacrifice that we are making in that that we invite you to join in with.

And fourthly, really importantly, *this family is shaped by Scripture*. That's something we're going to see unfold next week in Nehemiah 8 and 9, but it's all one with Nehemiah gathering people as a community here in chapter 7. That's why chapter 7 flows into chapter 8 all in one sentence.

We don't gather for the work of God without being shaped by the Word of God - thirsting for it *together*, hearing it *together*, responding to it emotionally and practically *together*, changing our minds and our actions in the light of it *together*. Flourishing and growing in it *together*. Much more on this with Ken next week.

God chooses to do His work of renewal and transformation not through charismatic leaders, but through 'up for it' communities with faith in Him, love for Him and commitment to Him and to one another.

That's you, St. Columba Church. I truly believe that God is going to do great things through *this* family of faith in Jesus. That what we build together here with the enabling of the Holy Spirit; living together in safety, service, sacrifice and Scripture; is going to bring glory to God and fullness to this city.

*That's* why I'm in this church. How about you?