

Responding to Poverty : 3 of 4 : Christ Church, Kenilworth

REBUILDING THE WALLS - Sermon Notes

Nehemiah

01 June 2008

READING

Nehemiah 1 : 1 - 6

Nehemiah 2 : 1 - 5; 11 - 18

Nehemiah 6 : 15,16

INTRODUCTION

When Duncan asked me if I would do a series on responding to poverty a few months ago I got excited and intimidated. Excited because this is something that is very close to my heart and intimidated by the thought of trying to say something new about this topic in a context where I believe we should all be engaging in the battle against poverty. Initially I thought I could lay out a grand plan of action that we could all get excited about implementing, addressing the key issues of poverty with drive and vigour.

But like the disciples in the story of the feeding of the 5000, the resources I see that we have available are very small in comparison with the need that exists in our city. I recognise that any plan WE end up making will fall short and so I ended up starting with the command to build relationships with people who do not share our economic wealth and the command to see and hear the poverty around us because it is here where the response starts.

But just as faith without works is dead so to is seeing, hearing and loving without works dead. John mentioned to me after last week's sermon that whenever God sees and hears it is always followed by an action, by a response. I believe that is must be so with us - once we have seen and heard our neighbours then we **MUST** respond and it is this I want to speak about tonight.

Tonight's readings were a selection of readings from Nehemiah aiming to give a brief overview rather be the specific texts I work off tonight. Tells the story of Nehemiah, in exile hearing news of how things are going in Jerusalem. The setting is around 445 - 432 BC. The third wave of exiles returning to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah is a very good model for us of someone responding to poverty in an effective, considered and ultimately effective manner.

NEHEMIAH AS A MODEL

It starts with a broken heart - chapter 1 - where Nehemiah sees and hears from friends about the state of Jerusalem. This is what I have been talking about over these past few weeks. An effective sustained transformative response to poverty always starts with a broken and contrite heart. And so I want to pose the question to us again asking where our relationships are and where are our hearts being broken.

BUT Nehemiah didn't stop there, in chapter 2 we see him engaging the king about this problem and eventually getting the king's authority to go to Jerusalem and do something about it. And this is where we are placed, perhaps - a broken heart, friends and the opportunity has arisen to respond. What can we learn from Nehemiah at this point.

Assessment without promise

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem on a mission from God with a passion to make a difference and yet his first act is to move around in secret, to not tell anyone what God had put on his mind.

This is so often opposite to our style and culture. The Lord has told me to do this and so we charge in where angels fear to tread and wonder why things go wrong. A reasonably prominent Christian author and speaker arrived in southern Africa a few years ago proclaiming that God had told him to apply his money, his influence and his mind to addressing the problems of AIDS and poverty in this part of the world. He had passion, money and was obviously very gifted but a few years later was chased out of the area with his tail between his legs. I do not doubt this man's sincerity or even that he was here in response to a prompting from God but I do know that he could have learnt something from Nehemiah.

Enter slowly, do your research, find out who the leaders and players are and come to a clear understanding of what God is calling you to.

We are wealthy and many of us come from a culture that values outputs very quickly. When we respond to poverty we have a tendency to act first, to arrive promising money and potential solutions and the residents of poor communities are tired and angry about this. Often they will not say anything because they are vulnerable and are willing to play the game but we must follow Nehemiah's example.

Local ownership

I love chapter 3 of Nehemiah but it is a very boring chapter to read. It is a list of all the people who built the wall and which part of the wall they built. But herein lies a wonderful secret that local ownership and effort is much more sustainable than an outsider coming to solve the problem. Nehemiah worked hard to involve the local leadership and community in solving the problem. In using their talents, resources and energy to solve problems.

Scan through Chapter 3 quickly.

What an amazing lesson and it continues to be learnt this week. As churches and other places respond to the crisis of displaced people there is a strong correlation between places where the people have been given responsibility for their lives, to cook, to clean, to wash etc. They are not useless human beings who need to be coddled - they are people with huge gifts and talents who currently need some extra assistance.

If Nehemiah lived in the current world and he managed to convince King Artaxerxes to respond to the wall it would probably look like international aid often looks like. The King would raise a huge load of money, announce that he is making a contribution to the fight against broken walls in the developing world. Then he would use the money to pay his construction companies to build wall. The money stays in his country, the skills stay in his country and the only thing that is built is a wall. Nehemiah's way builds a wall but also builds a community.

Perseverance in the face of opposition

Chapter 4 describes how their work is ridiculed and opposed and how this discouragement is overcome. This is an important lesson in the textbook of responding to poverty. There will be opposition, there will be discouragement - it needs to be countered.

I think the important word in this description is WE in verse 9. We, we, we. WE cannot do this alone and we should not neglect our relationship with God and others.

The Warehouse this week - lessons.

Structural Injustice as well

Chapter 5 holds a very important lesson for us, particularly in the South African context. Nehemiah addresses unjust political and business practices that are keeping the community in their poverty. He doesn't just build the wall. He not only does that but he changes his own practice to set an example for others.

The reasons people are poor are complex but I don't believe it can be argued that a significant component is sinful and unjust structures of society. The way we do business and politics, the way we spend our money. All of these affect our neighbours who are poor.

As we seek to respond to poverty as we build and change things we must be looking at our society and our own lives to see what it is that we do that oppress the poor.

In our evangelical tradition in the past decades there has arisen a disturbing theology (implicit at least but often explicit) that separates unseen things from seen things and places the focus of the Christian life on the unseen. So we have a theology where the focus is getting into heaven and not living out a saved life in the here and now. It is this theology that allowed many within our church tradition to simply let apartheid exist and not question its deep sinful roots.

Last week I spoke about guilt and this is often an area where we don't want to go as white south africans but I want to say it. I believe that if you are going to respond to poverty in south africa you cannot do it without confronting at some point the deeply sinful reality of our past.

I know there are many who would disagree with me but I believe that a significant part of the reason that we have struggled to move forward in this country is that the church has not led the way in dealing with the reality of our past. We let the government and the TRC lead something which is, well should be, in the DNA of our church and so we continue to be a broken and seperated community.

As we follow Nehemiah we dare not ignore Chapter 5.

SACRAMENTS

So how can we start doing this. The stuff I've spoken about can each be a sermon series on their own. But we need to start somewhere. Here are some thoughts.

Read Nehemiah

Read books like Walking with the poor by Viv Greig

Attend a community development course run by the Warehouse. We could do a weekend introduction later this year if there was sufficient interest

Find a good community developer and serve them for a while

YWAM DTS as an option

Gap year at the warehouse...or similar rather than seeing europe...see your own country.

Watch a movie like Amazing Grace.

Listen to Tony Campolo sermons

Say something about Feeding the 5000 here and the miracle that happens when we bring what we have and it meets the need.

CONCLUSION

So, if you have been alert you will notice that Nehemiah goes on for a number of other chapters. So what about these, in my bible the section from chapter 8 through 13 is called reforming the people and it is here where I want to end tonight. Because the reformation spoken about in this section is not just those who are poor it is a reformation of the entire society.

Nehemiah didn't just find a Jerusalem with broken walls he found a broken community. Not just the poor community, the wealthy rulers as well. I have a quote on my facebook page which I like -

"What thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call the problem of riches

We, our city, our country and our continent are a broken community. Chapter 8 starts with "and the people gathered as one person".

As we respond to poverty let us :

- Seek our broken hearts
- Seek to understand the context and situation
- Involve the community fully in their own solutions
- Deal with the structural injustices that keep people poor.

But let us realise that we are part of this broken and responding to poverty involves our REFORMATION in CHRIST as much as our response to poverty.

Amen