

Sermon preached by Rev Tom Halls at the Healing Service at St. Andrew's Cathedral,
Sydney on Wednesday 3rd October 2007. Reading: Nehemiah 6 & 7
Topic: "Do Not Believe all You Hear"

The senses of sight and sound are not meant to be obeyed mindlessly. The sound of a large truck bearing down upon you when standing in the middle of the road will provoke a rapid response - hopefully, but the evidence of the senses generated every moment of the day needs to be processed by the brain. Effectively that is what Nehemiah is saying here. Don't believe all you hear! It is not a call to cynicism, but a reminder to think critically. Statements of truth and righteous acts invite opposition. Stress can be avoided by taking an easier way, but those who make that detour contribute nothing to final victory in the pursuit of godliness. In fact real leaders and all committed disciples thrive on the stress opposition produces. It clarifies their vision and underlines their commitment to achieve the ultimate goal. Nehemiah was such a leader.¹ THE MESSENGERS OF SANBALLOT [6:1-9] Called by God and sent by an eastern king to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah found himself opposed in many ways. Sanballot, Tobiah, Geshem and the rest he describes as our enemies [6:1]. The diligence of religious zealots opposed to the leading of God's gracious Spirit is amazing. They will go to any lengths, hurt any number of people - even themselves, in their determination to have their own way and prevent the progress of God's plan. Such is the insanity envy and hatred produce. Though the wall had been rebuilt with not a gap left in it, Nehemiah noted that he had not set the doors in the gates. This signalled to his enemies their last chance to snatch victory, since laying a siege around the completed city would never be tolerated by the eastern king, and invite savage reprisals. They sent a message to Nehemiah, Let us meet in one of the villages on the plains of Ono [6:2]. That would take Nehemiah away from Jerusalem to a spot halfway to Samaria and very close to Ashdod. A modern equivalent would be to call a meeting in a coffee shop in Baghdad or a bar in Bali. Nehemiah's assessment is clear. They were scheming to harm me. His response was adamant. I am doing a great work [for God]. Why should the work stop while I go to you? [6:3] In processing what he heard the man of God applied spiritual priority which could not tolerate introducing unnecessary danger and wasting time. His firm rejection of interruptions, and wise suspicions about entrapment, though unpopular with his enemies, inspired confidence in his followers. More messages came with the same temptation to leave the work leaderless and Jerusalem undefended. This was based no doubt on the principle, distract the leader and stop the work. In the Gospels our Lord Jesus, quoting the prophet expressed it like this: strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep. [Ezekiel 13:7; Matthew 14:27] These challenges were ignored and building continued unabated. A messenger arrived with an open letter in his hand [6:5]; its contents available to fuel rumour, smear character and indirectly to frighten Nehemiah. Gossip, guaranteed by no less a character than Geshem, indicated that a Jewish revolt against the eastern king was being led by Nehemiah who had usurped power and appointed prophets to proclaim his right to rule [6:6]. Pressure to compromise with God's enemies appeared in the form of an implied threat. Come and talk to us because the gossip will get back to the king [6:7]. Employment of this popular worldly technique is a recipe for spiritual disaster. Nehemiah gave a clear denial of wrongdoing and identified Sanballot as the fabricator of this gossip [6:8]. The pursuit of power deluded his enemies into thinking they could frighten the people of God and stop them fulfilling his purpose for them in the world [6:9]. The man of prayer cried out to the Lord, strengthen my hands. Like the prophet he went to the source of all power so that he as leader would be strong and unwavering in the face of opposition. [Zechariah 13:7] I have had people say to me from time to time that they have had a prophecy for my life. With 66 books of revelation from the Father, carefully formulated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and focussed on the sovereign saving work of the Son, what need do I have of ideas outside that perfect framework of ultimate wisdom? Not all prophets are from God.² THE PROPHETS OF SATAN [6:10-14] Having overcome the messengers of Sanballot, Nehemiah found himself opposed by prophets of satan like Shemiah. This is the only reference to this man and the only description of him is that he was shut in at home. Whether it was due to physical disability, ritual defilement under Old Testament regulation, or some other reason we have no way of knowing. Nehemiah's response to Shemiah's suggestion of running away from the work and hiding in the temple makes it clear that this is no prophet of the Lord. Note the man of God's fourfold response of faith. [i] Raw courage Should a

man like me run away? [6:11] No one called by God and authorised by the most powerful earthly king could contemplate any other course of action than going forward and leading from the front.

[ii] Real humility Despite his divine calling and social standing, Nehemiah was not a priest. It was unthinkable under the Old Testament for him to presume to live in the temple precincts. [2 Chronicles 26:16ff][iii] Rational perception I realised that God had not sent [Shemiah]. He prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballot had hired him [6:12]. Nehemiah smelled a rat, several rats in fact! He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me. O [6:13][iv] Robust prayer [5:19; 13:14,22,29,31]The falsehood of the prophets was not a cause for discouragement or fear, but a matter for discussion with God. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me. [6:14] Not every religiously inclined or apparently moral person is honest, nor do they come from God. Don't believe all you hear.³ THE WALL WITHOUT GATES [6:15-19]Though the gates were missing, the completion of the wall in the sixth month of the Jewish calendar Elul was an amazing achievement. The whole project had been undertaken in 52 days. Archaeological reports speak of small, rough, irregular and unequal stones being used, as if they were using any kind of material that came to hand [J Garrow Duncan]. The psychological effect on our enemies [6:1] was overwhelming. All the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence [6:16]. Like the boozy, boasting sportsmen and so called self made entrepreneurs of our generation, when confronted with reality in God's world [something like being beaten by a better team, or a more effective company] Nehemiah's godless neighbours were dislodged from their comfortable idolatry. They realised that this work had been done with the help of our God. Those with vested interested kept trying to derail the project. Such people rarely recognise spiritual values. Tobiah employed the oldest contract system in the world; that of marriages of convenience, and he kept up his intimidating letter writing. [6:17-19]⁴ THE WALL WITH GATES [7:1-73]When the doors were mounted in the gateways there was national sigh of relief. The city could be secured again. Singers and doorkeepers were appointed, as befits a temple city. An impressive leader called Hanani was put in charge of Jerusalem. [7:2] He may have been the brother who first made Nehemiah aware of the problems in the ruined city [1:2]. He was a man of integrity, who feared God more than most; the sort of person who is needed to lead any spiritual work. Gates were opened late and closed early to avoid shadows in which evil people might lurk [7:3]. Gatekeepers guarded each opening in daylight hours, and dad's army [citizen forces] were at their posts and on call near their houses. Family lists and projected building restoration is noted in detail. Hassle-free living so longingly worshipped in our generation might be desirable if we did not have to contend with consequences. Pursuit of truth and righteousness is a tougher way to go; costly and tiring, but in the long run it is better. Nehemiah chose this way. Whatever it is that brings us to consider this option - awareness of wrongdoing over which we need to repent [gossip? power play? immorality?]; the presence of sickness, sorrow or things we cannot control, it is vital to turn to the risen Lord Jesus. He who died for us and rose again, who ascended to the Father's presence and intercedes for us says: Come to me all who labour are heavy laden and I will give you rest. [Matthew 11:28]