

Redevelopment of Fifth Century BC Jerusalem was a prayerful exercise from beginning to end. Nehemiah prayed for four months before he even approached King Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem at first [1:1 ; 2:1]. When the rebuilding of the walls was being undertaken each section was dedicated as it was completed. Reading of the ancient scriptures led to the revival of festivals which had long been neglected. Nehemiah looked for the guidance of God at every stage of the work. The new Prime Minister of Australia has indicated that he will not be looking to God for guidance, but to "experienced councillors". [Illawarra Mercury, 10 December 2007]. Nehemiah's approach was completely different, and so it continued until the job was done; preparation and provision begun, continued and ended in prayer.

1 THE DEDICATION OF THE WALLS [12:27 - 13:3]

[i] Preparation [12:27-30]

All temple helpers [levites] were recalled to Jerusalem "from where they lived". This was a big organisation and so all leave had to be cancelled. The Levites were dedicated "with gladness", motivated as much by joy, the fruit of obedience, as by duty. There was thanksgiving in song accompanied by cymbals, harps and lyres. Here is an early reflection of that picture of heaven presented later in the Book of Revelation. Singers, as Old Testament commuters came from villages on the surrounding plain [12:28]. From Netophah in the south, Beth Gilgal [12:29] in the east and Geba and Azmaveth in the north. This was also a 'grass roots' movement involving representatives of all the people of God. Priests and Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates and walls of the city [12:30]. It was not simply a matter of order and cleanliness. The concern was for holiness; the cutting off of any evil that can separate God from his people. No healing of people or land is possible without this first step.

[ii] Procession [12:31-39]

The Princes of Judah were obviously not wobbly old men, because they processed around the city on top of the reconstructed walls. They were led by "two great crowds" giving thanks to God; one on the right with Ezra [12:36] and the other on the left with Nehemiah [12:38]. Appropriately, the processions met in the "House of God" [Temple], that solid symbol of God's presence among his Old Testament people. Under the provisions of the New Testament, God indwells his faithful people in the Person of his Holy Spirit. Wherever they gather he is with them!

The focus of the occasion was not on the walls or the city, but on God [12:40]. Trumpets blasted [12:41]. Singers sang loudly under the leadership of Jezrahiah [12:42]. Sacrifices were offered [12:43] and there was much rejoicing, just as it will be in heaven. Social distinction were maintained: men were men, women were women and children were children, but all were absorbed in wonder and praise. "The joy of Jerusalem could be heard far away" [12:43]. That's how it is when the people of God are walking in fellowship with the Lord. No healing of people or land is possible without this.

[iii] Provision [12:44-47]

It was not all noise and pretension to great things. Practical provisions were made. Overseers were appointed to watch over the storerooms filled with offerings [12:44]. The religion of Israel was funded by people giving the firstfruits of everything received and the paying of the various tithes required under law. This enabled priests and levites, who had not allocation of land to live at the same standard as people from other tribes. Singers and gatekeepers were provided for on a daily needs basis, not as a novelty in a revamped religion, but as in "the days of David and Asaph" [12:45-46]. Foreigners to the faith of Israel were excluded according to the Law of Moses [13:1; Deuteronomy 23:3-5]. This was in pursuit of religious purity, not racial intolerance. People from Ammon and Moab were singled out because when they had the opportunity to support God's people they not only refused this duty, but cursed the people in the name of their idol, Baal! There can be no unity in opposing views, so here as elsewhere foreigners to the faith of Israel were rejected [13:3; 9:2; 10:28]. As citizens of our Post Modernist society where individuality is the ultimate goal and compromise the means for attaining peace these ancient provisions are hard to understand. Descendants of the so-called 'Enlightenment' which has shaped our present community cry out, 'No standards please, we are modern'. Followers of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ under either the Old or the New Covenant have a different outlook. They know that their

healing is vitally linked to truth as revealed in the Bible and commitment to the God's way, however costly that may become for them in a world out of step with God.

2 THE PRESENCE OF GREAT EVIL [13:4-30]

After returning to Jerusalem following a period of service back in Babylon Nehemiah "learned about the evil thing" done in the Temple while he had been absent [13:6-7].

[i] Tobiah in the Temple [13:4-9]

The weak willed [or perhaps evil?] priest Eliashib rented a room in the Temple to an old enemy of Nehemiah and Israel, Tobiah; a man who had opposed the work of God from day one [6:17-19]. This was not only an example of unequal yoking between believer and unbeliever, but an insult to God. It also created a practical problem over the storage and distribution of offerings for the priests and other temple employees. Action man Nehemiah isolated the problem and pounced on the villains. In an act of public justice and helpful organisation he evicted Tobiah [13:8], purified the room and set it aside again for its proper holy use [13:9]. Obedience to God's Word will rarely be popular, but it is the only effective way to obtain his blessing. No healing of people or land is possible without this.

[ii] Temple Helpers were unfed [13:10-14]

Levites and singers, who had not received their allocation of food and other provisions while the Temple process had been perverted, had returned to farming. Action man Nehemiah was quick to correct the problem again. He rebuked public officials, "Why is the House of God forsaken?" [13:11]. There can be little sympathy for these people, because they are the ones who proclaimed loudly how they would never neglect the House of God [10:39]. Order was restored in the system. Officials returned to duty. Tithes were brought into the Temple and faithful distributors were appointed to attend to this family matter on behalf of "their brethren"; the bonds of fellowship in the Lord being even deeper than those of the flesh. There is as much love as honour needed here. When the Apostles of the New Testament were confronted with the needs of the widows, they made a similar provision, so that they would not be distracted from the preaching of God's Word while at the same time ensuring that the sisters and other needy brethren would not have to beg, or do worse in order to live. Incipient Gospel practice was there among the people of God under the Old Covenant; same God, same world, same purpose. When you don't do it God's way things get worse.

[iii] Treading Underfoot of the Sabbath [13:15-22]

When I was converted to Christ in this diocese fifty years ago I soon understood that it is essential to the maintenance of a healthy relationship with the Lord to set aside at least one day in seven to re-affirm the Truth and restore fellowship with him. Under the Old Covenant this principle was encoded in law.

[a] Nehemiah warned God's people against the abuse of his will. They had slipped into the practice of stealing the Sabbath rest day for treading grapes into juice [13:15] and carting merchandise of all kinds. Their bank balances may have swelled, but their spiritual deposits had reached a low level. They were even buying and selling with foreigners [13:16]; a process hardly calculated to lead to holiness of life.

[b] Nehemiah confronted the leaders, those who could do something about these evil practices. "What is this evil thing you are doing, desecrating the sabbath day?" [13:17]. There is nothing new about sin. It represents the same point of entry into our lives for evil. "Your forefathers did the same thing." [13:18; Amos 8:5; Jeremiah 17:19-27] "Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath."

[c] Nehemiah prevented the activity [13:19-22]

Gates were locked before sunset prior to the Sabbath [13:19a]. reliable men were placed on duty to guard the gates [13:19b]. Traders loitering near the walls were threatened with arrest [13:20-21] and levites were purified for the essential duty of guarding the gates as a Sabbath duty [13:22].

[d] Nehemiah condemned mixed marriages [13:23-30]

Believer and unbeliever could live under the same roof, but they could never be one before the Lord. Even worse, their children did not learn the Jewish language [13:23-24], thereby losing the ability to understand the Word of God [8:6,8,9,12] and being cut off from the covenant promises of life. A learned professor of Theology announced on the ABC radio religion programme today, that there is no god who can intervene

in our world and put things right. He may not believe in God, and the new Prime Minister may not seek the guidance of God, but we know there is “no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved”. Though blessed with Bible preaching from the first days of European settlement, Australia today is so far removed from God’s way, that Archbishop Peter Jensen and the Diocesan Synod are calling upon every believer to hand a copy of the Bible to anyone who will receive it. It is their God-given right to know the Truth, and it is the truth alone that will set them free.

This explains why Nehemiah took such severe measures in his day. Rebuke, cursing, beatings, public disgrace and forced oaths to avoid marriages without faith were all employed in that desperate period [13:25-26]. Nehemiah cited the sin of Solomon who learned idolatry from his wives and dealt with the High Priest’s son who had married the daughter of another enemy of the faith Sanballot; a fellow conspirator with Tobiah opposing the work of God [13:27-29]. Nehemiah purified the priests and levites “of everything foreign” to the faith of Israel [13:30], assigning duties and providing necessities. The ordering of society reflected the grace and government of God. No healing of people or land is possible without this.

Healing physically, spiritual, mentally, or restoration of relationships all begin with reformation and revolution.

Reformation means re-affirmation of the truth as revealed in the Bible. That God made and sustains his world. That His Son Jesus became one of us at the first Christmas so that we might become one with Him forever. That faith in his death for us and in his resurrection, ascension into heaven and session [sitting at the Father’s right hand] is the beginning of a whole new life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit given to every believer as a seal and guarantee of eternal life. That Jesus will return in majesty to receive us at the right time.

Revolution means restoration of righteous behaviour in our present life as we proclaim the Gospel and show the love of Christ living a life to his glory, not ours.