

Keynotes from Clive Baines' am Sermon on 11/07/2021

Title: "Being connected"

Text: Nehemiah 8 verses 1-12

Scripture references from the ESV or NSV

Nehemiah 8:1-12 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Every day is a day that the Lord has made, for us to rejoice and be glad in, but on the Lord's Day particularly we can rejoice in gathering to receive the light of God's word. However, we need to prepare ourselves before God to hear what he has to say, not just today but every day. There are often distractions in our lives that prevent us from

actually reading the scriptures, and one thing that might help is to listen to someone else reading scripture to you. We see this method used in today's passage.

This was no ordinary gathering, taking place as it did at the Water Gate on the first day of the seventh month, after the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. It was the people themselves who asked Ezra to read the scriptures to them, wanting to hear what God had to say to them so that they would learn to fear the Lord and to be obedient to his word. Moses had commanded this in **Deuteronomy 31:9-13**:

⁹ Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰ And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. ¹² Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, ¹³ and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess."

What had brought them to this point? When Nehemiah heard about the destruction of Jerusalem, he cried out to God in great distress, weeping over the sin of God's people and pleading with God for forgiveness and restoration.

(Nehemiah 1: 4-11 see p4)

God granted his prayer and Nehemiah found favour with the king who gave him permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Because God's hand was on Nehemiah, the king also gave him access to the building materials he would need. Nehemiah was an ordinary man, much used by God because he sought to do God's will in the situation he was in. It was not just skilled tradespeople who rebuilt the walls but ordinary people from all walks of life were involved. If you were to go to Jerusalem today, you would see that the walls were built by untrained hands! In just 52 days after Nehemiah had prayed his initial prayer, the walls were rebuilt. We can all take encouragement from this. Nehemiah sought God's help in prayer for what seemed an impossible task. He looked to God who had put him in a position where he could get the help he needed, and who gave him the ability, wisdom and strength to do what was needed. Nehemiah walked and talked with God, connecting

with him and he longed for his people to know that same connection and find their joy in the Lord.

No matter what we are going through, we need to stay connected to God and to walk and talk with him.

- We often need to be reminded to read the word of God but here it was the people who were asking to have it read to them – they were eager to hear what God had proclaimed in his word.

We need to ask ourselves if we have that same eagerness to hear God speak to us through his word.

Ezra had five books to read to the people – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He, and the men standing with him, were on a platform not so much that they could be seen, but so that the word of God was lifted high. Ezra was quite old by this time, and the men who stood with him were in part there to support him as he read. He began the reading by asking for the Lord's blessing.

- Prayer is a fitting way to come to the word of God and should always be our starting point.

Amazingly, the people stood from early morning until midday (v3 above) to hear the word read, and they were attentive throughout all that time.

Listening is not something that comes easily to us today. We all have plenty to say but often fail to listen. Yet here we can see that the people listened to what was being said and care was taken to make sure that they understood it. (vv7-8 above). **This is a group of people who were eager to gather and to hear the word. Does this apply to us?**

Ezra prayed for God's blessing that the word would come alive to the people and they would know the power of God in their lives. In Ezra's day, the written word would not have been available to the ordinary people.

- We are so blessed to have such easy access to God's word today. Do we truly listen to it and apply to our lives what he says to us through it?

The people here were hungry to gather and hungry to hear God's word.

- In our multimedia age, are we too prone to prefer sitting in front of a screen at home? Gathering together to hear God's word is an important part of our life with the Lord. We are reminded in Hebrews not to stop meeting together and need to come back to this.

Hebrews 10:24 -25 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ **not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,** but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Ezra opened up the Word of God in front of the people. The book we have in our possession does not just contain the word of God – it **is** the word of God and it is alive.

Hebrews 4:12-13 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- The Bible is a direct letter, written by God and personally addressed to each one of us. We do not worship

the book but we worship the author. As Ezra read the word to the people, we can see that it moved their

hearts, in the way that God said that it would.

Isaiah 55:10-11 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

The people were convicted by the word that they heard, and they mourned and wept as they understood that they had sinned in not keeping God's laws, and in turning away from him.

- God's word brings conviction as he speaks into our hearts by his Spirit. He highlights areas of sin in our lives but he also has given us the solution. We have Jesus who ultimately turns our darkness and weeping into joy as we lay our sin before him.

Nehemiah and the Levites told the people to rejoice because this was a day holy to the Lord (v10 above).

- When we look on our sin, it destroys us, but when we look upon our Saviour, he rebuilds us. We hear the conviction but then we hear of the love of the Father who delivers us. He is our joy and our strength.

When hearts are changed because the Word of God has become a reality, we see the evidence in changed lives – lives that are lived for the sake of God, looking out for the needs of others and sharing from our plenty with those who have little. We can feed one another both physically and spiritually as we make much of our God. The people who gathered in Ezra's day felt the weight of conviction of sin but that conviction turned to joy, and they responded with obedience to all that they had heard.

Jesus told us that the one who listens to his words and does them is like one who builds his house on a solid foundation.

Matthew 7:24-27 Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

What is our connection with the people of Ezra's day?

- We know that they longed to hear God's word.
- We have seen that they made preparations for the word to be read.
- We have seen that others were actively involved in supporting the teaching of the word of God

As a congregation we are blessed to be able to say that we are connected with those people.

- We have a pastor who faithfully teaches the word of God
- We have those who actively support the teaching of the Word of God

Are we people who long to hear the word of God? Our greatest connection with the people of Ezra's day is to be those who 'Let the word of Christ dwell in us (you) richly'. **Colossians 3:16**

The living word needs to be living in us so that we know more and more of its power to transform our lives.

A rich indwelling of God's word changes us as we listen to it.

Nehemiah 1: 4-11 ⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."