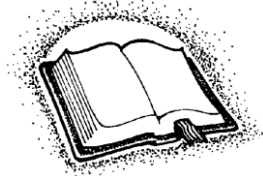


Unlocking the Bible (22)



Count on me: Lessons from the Book of Nehemiah

What we saw started in Ezra – the response to the opportunity given to return and re-establish Jerusalem as the central place, with worship and holy living restored - is continued in the book of Nehemiah.

This time it concerns the city and its walls rather than the Temple. It seems that this city lies in ruins and the walls are broken down, despite earlier rebuilding activity, leaving it defenceless. Something needs to be done.

On this occasion, however, the initiative does not lie with external royal decrees but with the agonised burden of one individual, albeit someone holding high office and close to the king.

The key to this book is Nehemiah's personal commitment even though in exile and in captivity. This first evidence of this emerges in his prayers, as a result of which he was granted leave by the king (in itself an acknowledgement of the integrity of his testimony) to return to his city, Jerusalem, to make his contribution. Secondly, it is evidenced in his tireless endeavours when he surveys the city and then takes up the challenge of rebuilding the walls and motivating those already in the city to cooperate and see this task fully completed and the city secured again.

Like those featured in the book of Ezra, he is committed and diligent. He goes out on his own, he encourages others, and he develops appropriate strategies to build the wall. He introduces a collaborative stance making them work on the wall with sword in one hand and trowel in the other, always ready to build and defend and to come to each other's aid should there be need to do so.

And, indeed there was need to do that for, as happened in the book of Ezra, there was serious opposition to what was going on. The authorities and local leaders perceived this as a threat and wanted to put a stop to it. (That happens also in the book of Esther.) But Nehemiah, by his commitment, initiative and diligence is able to withstand that.

Collaboration is also encountered at a different level, for the positive approach is helped, not only by Nehemiah's own example and exhortation but also by the involvement of Ezra the priest who reads from the Law and exhorts the people to live distinctive, holy, lives reflective of their role as the people of God.

What lessons are there for us from the Book of Nehemiah? Well, here we see again the importance of vision, commitment, diligence and individual initiative in seeking to ensure that "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The issue is not knowing what is needed but actually doing it, taking action, getting going. Although we are responsible, exercising our own initiative, we do so in fellowship with others and bearing one another's burdens. What is essential in equipping us for that persevering work is the exposure to, and effect of, teaching from the Bible and the practical experience of "sword and trowel" in practice.