

Introduction

What brings you here to this Church each week? I'm not asking how you travelled here but why you come. Is it to see old friends each week; or because you've always done it and it has become a habit? Or, is it to join with other believers to worship Jesus Christ, hear His Word and sing His praises? I hope it's the latter because that is exactly what God wants us to do; gather together to worship Him, hear His word, sing His praises and bring Him our prayers. We should never forget that God's Word is the foundation of our family and church life. Without God's Word there seems little point in meeting together as a church family. I realise that meeting together has been very difficult during the lockdown with all too many churches closing for the duration. In my opinion that brings no glory to God nor does it demonstrate reliance on His grace. Consequently it's wonderful that this church has remained open and continued to bring worship to God week by week.

I firmly believe that we should all gather together regularly to share our faith with one another. Not only that but it is equally important to our daily lives in a hostile world that we hear God's word read and expounded as regularly as we possibly can. Many have been called by God to undertake the vital role of preaching the Word of God; nothing more and nothing less and that is why Paul's statement to the Corinthians, "*we preach Christ crucified*" (1 Corinthians 1:23) is so important. It was vital in the first century and it is even more vital in the 21st century.

Preamble

If you aren't too familiar with Nehemiah let me explain. It is a wonderful Book that is possibly my favourite Book in the Old Testament. In the first few chapters, the Book deals with the re-building of the walls and gates around Jerusalem, a once great city that had become a scene of utter devastation. This was a mammoth task and yet with God's help, Nehemiah and the people completed the job in a very short space of time. Given the state of the wall and the difficulties the people faced that is an amazing result.

The passage in **Nehemiah 8** that we heard read earlier talks of reading and preaching God's Word, and the reaction it received, in the year 445 BC. Now, two and a half thousand years later, I hope you'll agree that there is an even greater need for that to happen, and it will happen despite the best efforts of the "woke" brigade, the politically correct movement and all those who are anti-Christian; God's Word will never be prevented from being heard.

When

The events described in Nehemiah date from 445 BC although the full story could be said to have begun in 586 BC when Jerusalem was invaded by the Babylonians. Many of the residents at the time were taken into exile whilst some remained; these being mainly the old and frail who were of little use to the Babylonians. By the time the Babylonians left, the city was in ruins; a pile of rubble. It was after the Babylonians had departed that Nehemiah became Governor and by the time he arrived the population of the city was rather mixed with many who were descended from those who remained after the Babylonian invasion living together with those descended from families who had been taken into exile. They

were a mixed bunch of people not all of whom spoke the same language which explains the comment in **8:2** and **8:3** referring to those “*who could [or were able to] understand*”.

Nehemiah set about rebuilding the walls and gates and enlisted the help of all the people. Those who could work did so by building the walls and repairing the gates. Those who couldn't formed a guard to ensure the safety of the workers, whilst the women cared for and fed the men and the children. It truly was a community effort involving all the people. Their efforts were successful since we know from **6:15** that “... *the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days*”; Elul being the sixth month of the Jewish lunar calendar. If only these people with Nehemiah in charge could take over the construction of London Crossrail link or HS2; I'm sure those projects wouldn't be over budget or late!

Who

Here at the beginning of **Nehemiah 8** we come to this huge gathering in the square by the Water Gate. All the people were there, not just a few, but “*all the people*”, no one was omitted. Just to remind you that “*all the people*” means everyone who was involved in rebuilding the wall whether doing the building work or being armed and on guard or feeding and caring for everyone else. On this occasion they were all gathered together as one large group with a common bond; they built the wall – no exceptions. Nehemiah is at pains to tell us that “*all the people*” were there, and that phrase is used 6 times with a further 5 references to “*the people*”. Nehemiah certainly intended us to understand that this truly was a community event.

What

So there we have it, “*all the people*” were gathered together in the square, but why were they there? What did they gather for? The answer is quite simple; they asked Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring the book of the Law given to Moses and read it to them. The NIV actually says that the people “*told*” Ezra to read to them, a word that carries more of the thought of being a demand rather than a simple request; that's how hungry they were to hear the book of the Law. However, there are a couple of interesting things worth noting about all this. Firstly, the gathering was spontaneous; there was no publicity and there was no order given to gather together; it was purely the people deciding for themselves that they should do this. Secondly, Ezra was exactly the right person to “*ask*” to read and preach to them. The Book of Ezra precedes this Book of Nehemiah not only physically in the Bible but also chronologically. Ezra was a great teacher and he and Nehemiah overlapped one another by a number of years. Ezra was also a great scholar and we know from **Ezra 7:10** that he “... *had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.*” I simply can't imagine a gathering such as this occurring in this country and at this time. That is a sad indictment of the current spiritual state of the nation compared with that of the people in 445 BC.

Normally a reading such as this would be given in the Temple Courts. However, on this occasion Ezra chose to speak in the public square so that more could gather to hear him. The book that Ezra read covered most if not all of the contents of the Pentateuch, the first five books of our Bible; that is: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

That is why the people all came together to worship God and hear His Word. It is interesting to consider that all these people were united by a longing to hear God's Word read to them and we certainly don't hear of any dissent. If only that was the case today! As part of my preparation for this sermon I listened to the sermon I gave here on Easter Day. I was reminded of the two disciples who walked on the Emmaus Road with Jesus as He explained Scripture to them. After Jesus had left them they said to each other, "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*" (Luke 24:32). I wonder if that happened to the people on this occasion and I wonder if it happens to us when we hear Scripture read.

Nehemiah tells us in 8:3 that, "*He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand.*" Imagine that, standing up for anywhere between five and six hours to hear God's Word being read non-stop. People today either get bored with a five minute reading or just don't want to hear God's Word read anyway. Contrast that public reading of Scripture with what the Mayor of London, Sadiq Kahn, was quoted as saying in 2019. He was asked during question time in the London Assembly, if street preachers could read from any part of the Bible without fear of being arrested. He is quoted as replying that "*although we have a tradition of free speech, there is not an unlimited right to freedom of speech*". He went on to add that legality of the public reading of the Bible was "*a question for a lawyer, or the Police, not me the Mayor*".¹ That was in 2019 and there is still uncertainty over whether or not the Bible can be read out loud in the street by a preacher. Thankfully there were no such doubts in Nehemiah's time and so Ezra was able to stand in the public square and read God's Word for a number of hours. Notice too, that we are told by Nehemiah that "*all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law*" (8:3b).

Later in 9:3 we learn that on the twenty-fourth day of the same month all the people, "*... stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.*" Could we do that? Could we stand, or sit, for a quarter of the day to hear the Bible being read and then spend another quarter of the day in worship; somehow I doubt that we could, or would. And yet, the people of Jerusalem did just that because they were eager to hear God's Word; they were hungry to hear God's Word, and further to that, they were hungry to have it explained to them. That was the role of the priests and Levites who are mentioned in 8:7-8; they were "*making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read*" (8:8). When talking about Levi, Moses writing in Deuteronomy said, "*He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel. He offers incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.*" (Deuteronomy 33:10). That was the role of the Levites, to teach God's Word and lead worship. That was also something that Paul urged Timothy to do when he wrote to him and said, "*Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*" (1 Timothy 4:13).

¹ Woodcraft, Ruth, *evangelicals now*, May 2019, page 1

It is the reaction of the people as God's Word is read that fascinates me. Nehemiah tells us that *"all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law"* (8:9b). This was an emotional response and was most certainly a heart-felt response. How do we react when we hear Scripture being read? Does it bring an emotional response or does it just wash over us? Do we listen or do we just mentally doze while the preacher waffles on for a few minutes? The people of Jerusalem were eager for God's Word and we are told they listened *"attentively"*; they must have done so to have made such an emotional response. Remember that they were hungry for God's Word hence standing in the square for more than a few hours. They wanted to hear God's Word; they wanted to have it explained to them and they wanted to worship God as a result of hearing that Word.

Nehemiah obviously observed this emotional response and the attendant weeping and so told the people; *"Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength"* (8:10b). Later, as instructed, the people went away to eat and drink, send food to those in need and *"to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them"* (8:12). Hearing God's Word being read may have brought that outburst of tears but it also brought them great joy: so much joy that they could celebrate having a new understanding of God's Word. A further reaction comes in 8:6 where we read that having heard God's Word, *"all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground."* I would suggest that not only did they listen attentively but also reverently, a reverence that led to worship and praise.

God's Word is wonderful but isn't always easy to understand which is why there are preachers and teachers available to help. The people hearing Ezra and the subsequent explanations were moved to feel great joy at this new understanding that they had. I wonder if people today feel the same. I wonder if people leave a morning service and instead of complaining about the length of the sermon or the choice of songs, actually reflect on what they have heard from and about God's Word. I wonder if they feel the same joy that the people of Jerusalem felt having heard Ezra. I'm not always convinced that they do.

George Whitefield

I'm a great fan of George Whitefield a mid 18th century preacher and I've read a number of books about him and his work. He preached and evangelised in both England and the then colony of America. During that time he travelled long distances sometimes on foot but generally on horseback. Whitefield had a great reputation for preaching the gospel in the way it should be preached; he never preached what you might call "soft and fluffy" sermons. His strong views brought him into trouble since although he was an ordained Church of England Minister he was eventually banned from using any of their churches because of his beliefs in the new birth. That was a blessing in disguise as it led him to preach outdoors. He famously preached at a pit head in Bristol and as the miners, their faces blackened with coal dust, heard the message of eternal life in Jesus Christ, rivers of tears flowed down their cheeks leaving white tracks across their faces. During his time in America he would preach to thousands, sometimes to more than 10,000, many of whom travelled many miles to hear him. These people would stand for hours to hear and remain there as he preached

for an hour or more in the pouring rain. Would we do that today; I doubt it. Whitefield led a great revival in those parts of America in which he worked and we could most definitely do with someone like him today.

Two things stand out for me from the life of George Whitefield. Firstly he was determined to read and expound God's Word to as many people as possible. And secondly, just like those in 445 BC, the people were eager to hear God's Word. They travelled many miles to hear him; they stood and waited for him, and then they continued to stand for an hour or more, frequently in bad weather, to hear him read and preach from the Bible.

Today

What about today? How do people feel today about long Bible readings and having the passage explained? My perception is that many people get bored after a few minutes and certainly don't want to hear someone droning on reading the Bible for hour after hour. Nor do they want a long sermon. The late Duke of Edinburgh is reported to have told Ministers prior to services that they should preach for no longer than 8 minutes. Sadly all too many churches appear to follow that edict. Despite that Royal restriction, it remains incumbent on any preacher to read and expound God's Word at length.

Sadly not every church has such a person doing that. I heard the story not too long ago of a new Vicar who moved to a Parish near Oxford. Unfortunately he didn't preach the Word of God; I've no idea what he did preach but it certainly wasn't God's Word. A lady who attended the church was very upset by this and so asked the Vicar if she could start a home group called *Fireside* which would meet at her home on a weekly or fortnightly basis; perhaps surprisingly the Vicar said yes. She immediately set about inviting all the excellent Bible teachers in and around Oxford she could think of to come and lead those sessions. Her group was very well attended and grew over the 15 years that the Vicar was in his post. Sadly again, even after 15 years when the Vicar left he still hadn't preached God's Word. The growth of that small *Fireside* group illustrated that the people were eager and hungry to hear the Bible read and expounded and to understand what it meant for them. Unfortunately anecdotal evidence suggests that this isn't an isolated case and there are churches where God's Word right now is still neither read nor expounded.

A survey completed a short while ago by FIEC (the Fellowship of Independent Churches) concluded that only 3% of the population were born again Christians. They also discovered that there were huge swathes of the country without an evangelical church in the vicinity; that is, a church where God's Word would be read and expounded. This may help to explain why there seems to be a huge level of apathy in this country towards anything to do with God, especially the reading of His Word. People simply can't be bothered to go to church; always assuming they can find a suitable church close to where they live. Contrast that with the attitude of the people of Jerusalem. They were eager to hear God's Word; they were hungry to have it explained, and having heard both the Word and the explanation they were moved to tears and then to joy. If only people today would show the same emotion and the same desire.

Conclusion

Eager to hear God's Word – KNBC

When I read this chapter and heard a long talk on it, what stood out for me was the eagerness and hunger of the people to hear God's Word. They were prepared to stand in the public square for hours on end to hear Ezra read the Law of Moses. They were then prepared to stand for another few hours as the Levites expounded and explained God's Word so that they could understand what God was saying to them.

Contrast that attitude with modern times where people get bored with long Bible readings; where people get fidgety if a service lasts for more than an hour; where some Ministers and Churches don't even preach God's Word. It is quite a contrast!

The modern world needs to hear God's Word and I remain convinced that if more were to hear it and meditate on it then the world would be a better place.

I recommend that you read and re-read this chapter and try to picture all those people in your mind's eye as they listened to God's Word and their emotions went from tears to joy. Perhaps it will have the same effect on you.