

Nehemiah 5 – Integrity

Well, I'm here, back in church again, for those who are watching this online. But.... There's nobody in the congregation!! In truth, I don't know how long it'll be before we're all able to meet together normally, to sing, chat, hug and eat cakes together (assuming Lionel hasn't woofed them all down before we get there!!). However, at least being able to be in church to share God's message is some kind of first step back towards normality again.

The message today is going to be uncomfortable. It may be a bit uncomfortable for you because I'm going to be talking about how often there's a great big gap between what we say we believe, and the way we actually live our lives. It's certainly going to be uncomfortable for ME! Put it this way. If you feel at any stage I'm pointing the finger at anyone, you can be sure I have 3 fingers pointing back at myself!

Today's about rhetoric and reality; about our public face and our private life; and about how often there's a yawning great gulf between them. We're familiar with this gulf in the world around us. Government advisers help set down the rules for lockdown – and then they not only cheerfully ignore them, but go on to justify their actions afterwards. The utilities assure us when we try to contact them that “your call is very important to us!” And then they keep us hanging on the end of the phone line for 40 mins!

We could spend all day looking at examples of hypocrisy “out there” in the world. But of course the issues are closer to home for God's people. They always have been, as we see in **Nehemiah 5 : 1-19**

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.” ³ Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹ So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

¹² “We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. ¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!” At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴ Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵ But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. ¹⁶ Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

¹⁷ Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. ¹⁹ Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.

This reading is a window into Nehemiah's personal INTEGRITY. While the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is going on, life is very hard for the ordinary people. Many are going seriously hungry. The need for grain (which they can't afford) is a matter of life and death. Some are having to mortgage their fields and homes to pay for it. Some are even selling their children into slavery out of sheer desperation. The comparatively rich are getting richer, while the poor are driven to despair. It's not a situation that's totally unknown in today's world! And the question is, "How is Nehemiah as their leader going to deal with it?"

Well, he could make all the right noises ("*I really care about the disadvantaged!*") but then do nothing. He could make a token response while everyone's upset and then quietly drop it later. ("*I'm setting up a commission of enquiry to report in 3 years time!*"). So will Nehemiah's reality match his rhetoric? Will he act with integrity to protect his people, or will he look after Number 1 first?

When the problem is brought to Nehemiah's attention, his first response is anger. But he doesn't react openly straight away: he gives himself time to think. And then he calls the nobles and officials together (they're the guys with the money and the power) and he tackles the issues head on.

"You're charging our people interest on their loans : that's against the law of Moses and it's got to stop! You're selling our people into slavery: and again, that's a No-no, and I want that stopped too!"

But he doesn't just accuse : he sets an example. *"All of us with resources are having to lend to the poor.*

But I and the folks with me aren't charging interest and neither should you be. So you need to repay the interest you've been taking; and where you've taken possession of fields, vineyards or olive groves so their owners can't earn a living to pay you back, well, those assets get returned to their rightful owners as from today."

The action is decisive and immediate. And what gives it authority is that Nehemiah is able to say, *"We're **all** doing this together. I'm doing exactly what I'm asking you to do."* And then, once he's got their agreement, he brings in the priests to witness the commitment they've made; and everyone who's assembled together there add their voice to confirm it.

But note: Nehemiah's concern for the poor doesn't just happen when the spotlight is shone on him.

Right from the moment he's set foot in Judah, he's set a different pattern from those who had gone before. He rejects the gravy train. There's a generous food allowance stipulated by the

Persian king, but Nehemiah doesn't make use of it. He has the authority to levy taxes to support a luxurious lifestyle but he never does so.

Not that he's going short. Not by a long chalk! But he's generous in his hospitality and in providing for others.

So.... This is what's going on in chapter 5. And the point I want to pick up on is not so much about Nehemiah being some sort of proto-socialist. The point I want to pick up on is the *integrity* of this man.

He doesn't have a public face that's caring and godly, and a completely different private face when he's on his own. The private Nehemiah is the same as the public Nehemiah. He's doing the right thing before it becomes an issue and before people start noticing. The reality matches the rhetoric.

Frankly, this is a huge challenge to those of us in Christian leadership and ministry!! We of course preach and teach commitment, prayer, love, holiness, evangelism. We say all the right things..... *"Prayer is vital.... God is challenging us to be holy..... He calls us to love one another, even the people we find difficult.... He calls us to share our faith with those who don't know Christ."*

And then we get home!! And all too often, the story there is a very different one! Maybe we struggle to pray. Perhaps we're not great at sharing our faith with non-Christians. Perhaps we gripe and complain about the people we find difficult. And possibly, our computer and social media use doesn't not look all that holy either!!

I am, sadly, I think, an exceptional Christian leader who does not live with some significant gap between what we preach and what we live. So here are the 3 fingers pointing back at me!! - because in truth I have never been, in this respect, an exceptional Christian leader. I'm one of the strugglers!

However!!.... YOU don't get off so easily either! Because this may apply in a special way to preachers and leaders, but it does also apply to each and every one of us.

In normal times, the way I might frame this would be to ask if you come to church with your "Christian face" on - your happy, committed, believing face - but take it off again when you go back to the "real world". But of course, these are not normal times, and none of us goes to church these days, with *whatever* kind of face!! But still, it is very possible to have theoretical Christian persona that's not at all the same as the real me or you!

Only you will know what the real issues are for you, but let me throw out a few questions. What about character?? I guess you, like me, would say that Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life. You may have sung the words, "All to Jesus I surrender"! But in real life, are you someone who likes to get their own way??

What about grace? As Christians, we're committed to a life of love, because we know how deeply Christ loved us. But does that show in our real world?? Or are we unforgiving, argumentative? Gossipy, dishing out the dirt? Inconsiderate?? Are there signs of grace at every level of our lives??

Or humility? Are you one of those folks who proclaim loud and long that we are all miserable sinners totally dependent on God's mercy? and then you go home or to work, resistant to the idea that you might ever get things wrong? Are you slow to apologise or admit when you're in the wrong? Resistant to putting your hand up when you've made a mess of things??

Then there's trust. "In God we trust" On a Sunday at least! But maybe we spend the rest of the week anxious and worrying? In other words, NOT trusting God!

Some of the hymns we sing are downright dangerous. *"Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold"...* I wonder how many of us sing this, but in our real lives we're devoted to making money, spending money, or succeeding in materialistic terms. The guy who was the pastor before me in one of my churches used to ask church members, *"Is your wallet converted yet?"* It wasn't a question that made him very popular!! But it's a valid question. Are your finances, is your bank balance converted yet?

Think of the different places where we live our Christian lives, and ask yourself how truly your commitment to Christ is expressed there.....

- in your car, driving (are you a model of patience and consideration??)
- in front of your computer or TV screen (It's not unknown for Christians to preach purity and watch porn)
- with your wife, your husband, your children...

I'm not a big fan of seaside rock. It's gooey, horrible stuff and it's terrible for your teeth. But one thing you can say for it : wherever you break it, it will still show exactly the same message. I suspect that would not be completely true of any of us. I suspect there would be a gap between our rhetoric and our reality, between what we profess and what we practise. If you feel you may be the exception to this rule, let me know, and I'll check it out with the other members of your family!!

So you and I have issues with integrity! And you may at this point feel like reaching for the bottle of pills and topping yourself. I'd advise against it!! We're never going to get this 100% right, but from Nehemiah's example, I want to suggest 4 ways we can move forward...

1. FACE THE CHALLENGE.

That probably seems blindingly obvious! But in point of fact, it can be all too easy simply to let the challenge to integrity go right over our heads. Like water off a duck's back. There's a whole raft of ways we can refuse to look the challenge of integrity in the face.

We can **deflect or ignore** it. *"I don't think that applies to me" "We live in very different world today"*

We can **minimise** it. *"What I did was just one of those things. It's just me". "Sure, I have a bit of a temper/ I'm an inveterate worrier, but that's just me: it's the way I'm made"! "None of us is perfect, you know" ...- by which we imply that therefore our own faults really don't matter.*

We can **justify** ourselves. *"That's how the world works" Tax evasion, sharp practice in business, little white lies... "Everyone does it".*

Nehemiah could have had that attitude : *"all the other governors levy taxes and take up their official allowances. Why shouldn't I?"*. The nobles and officials could have responded like that: *"Everyone lends and charges interest. Everyone takes advantage."* To their credit, they did not choose to justify their lack of integrity. They faced the challenge, and told the truth to themselves about what they were doing.

2. OPENLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE REALITY.

Wrongdoing is not something to be dealt with in secrecy behind closed doors. Nehemiah brings what's being done wrong out into the public arena. That's important. Sin thrives in darkness and in secrecy, and it shies away from the light.

Actually, this is true in the life of nations and societies too. We think the way we keep our leaders accountable in a democracy is by being able to vote them out of office every 5 years; and there's some truth in that. But another vital way we keep folks accountable is through free access to information. One of the vital defences of democracy is the free press and

media : the fact that if you are corrupt, or behave badly, there are people who are liable to unearth what you're doing wrong and tell people about it. Of course, not everyone in power appreciates that : they label the media as "Fake Noos", the "enemy of the people!" But actually we should honour and try to protect those who bring serious wrongdoing into the light. We need them!

Sin thrives in the dark: it wilts in the light. So Nehemiah publicly draws attention to what these guys are doing, and then makes sure the whole assembly witnesses the commitments they make to put things right. There's always much more chance of people keeping their promises when everyone has been around to hear them!

It is so important for us to be able to say openly before one another "*I get things wrong!*" Sometimes Christians play a sort of game of "Let's pretend". We come together with our happy, holy Christian faces on. "*How are things with you?*" "*Great, just great!*", we say, and actually inwardly we're a bit of a mess; we've had an argument with the family or whatever.

If there's one thing in the gospels that Jesus absolutely hated, it was pretence. That was the big sin of the Pharisees. They were hypocrites - like actors in a first century play, they were wearing a mask to show who they were pretending to be, playing a part that wasn't really them at all. Now, on stage, there's nothing wrong with that, because everyone knows what you're doing, and at the end of the day, nobody's trying to pull the wool over your eyes.

But in real life, and among the people of God, it's lethal!! That's why I love the fact that Eric's always very upfront about his foibles, and about things that might make him difficult to live with. And Eddie's the same. I used to be rather amused when he'd make himself sound like the Mad Axe Murderer! But this, you see, is healthy. Not pretending we're better than we really are. Not hiding our failures.

3. OPEN THE CLOSED DOORS.

What I mean by that? Ships are built with watertight compartments. It's a safety feature. It means if a ship gets holed below the water line, and water starts coming in, it can't get right through the ship, and so even when it's damaged it doesn't sink.

In a less helpful way, we sometimes operate on the same principle in our Christian lives. "*Behold I stand at the door and knock*", says the Lord Jesus in Revelation 3: 20. "*If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in*"..... And so we invite Jesus Christ into our life..... But we keep some of the doors closed! The study?? You can come in here! But not the office: that's where I run my business! I don't really want you in there Lord! You can come into my Sundays, but not into my Mondays. You can come into the kitchen, but not into the TV room: I'll make own choices there! And without quite saying so, we create no-go areas in our lives for Jesus as Lord. We don't want him running our business, dealing with our finances; and he can keep out of our relationships with the neighbours because we're currently at loggerheads with them!

For these guys in Nehemiah 5, they were happy for the Lord to be in their temple worship, their sacrifices, their work on the wall around Jerusalem. But they weren't allowing him to interfere with the serious business of making money!! And Nehemiah refuses to let them stay in that place. All the doors have to be opened!! Every area of life needs to come under the authority of God. And for us, one of the steps towards true integrity is to identify and unlock each of the closed doors in our lives : all the places we've put off limits to God, all the rooms where we've in effect said, "*But here, I'm doing things my way!*"

What are your closed doors? What are the rooms in your house where Jesus is not welcomed as Lord???

Let me encourage you honestly to identify them, one by one, and then give Jesus Christ the keys and invite him to come in and make them his own!

4. TAKE DEFINITE ACTION.

Everything in Nehemiah 5 is very specific. The nobles and officials renounce their claim to interest on their loans. They return goods that have been taken "in trust". And Nehemiah too is very specific in his actions. He waives his right to take an allowance as governor. He decides not to levy taxes. He operates an open house policy, so whatever he has, he shares.

Our responses need to be specific. I was speaking with a Christian businessman the other day. He referred to the government's job retention scheme, whereby they will give £1000 for each employee kept on after furlough comes to an end. "*We won't be claiming it*", he said, though I'm sure he could get away with it if he wanted. But he had enough of a level of integrity to say, "*I don't think we really qualify. We won't take it.*" Nehemiah wasn't perfect in his integrity. Nor were the people he led.. But they found specific actions to move their lives closer into line with way that - before God - they should have been.

It's easy to look at the issue of integrity, and feel completely condemned. Here I am. I've been a Christian for 56 years. And still there are big issues where my life does not reflect what I believe and say. Actually, though, guilt is unproductive: it doesn't achieve anything much. But repentance does; and repentance is about taking decisions and taking responsibility.

So let's each ask , "*God, what action do you want me to take today? What can I change today?*" It won't be a complete or a perfect response. There will still be issues for every one of us. But each of us can listen to the issues the Holy Spirit of God is putting his finger on. And we can make a response that is specific, that is substantial, that is practical. And we can do it now!

You may like to reflect with me the following prayer.....

Father God, You know none of us can feel totally at ease with the question of integrity: that none of us lives in a way that is properly consistent with what we profess. Thank you that we are saved by grace, accepted in Christ, just as we are, warts and all. But you have called us to a holy life, a life shaped by the Lord Jesus, and we pray you'd help us to be honest and practical as we respond to that challenge.

And would you watch over each member of our congregation? You know the joys and struggles, the hopes and needs of each one. And you know that more than anything we need your presence and your grace in our hearts day by day..... And now, to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— ²⁵ to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen.