

Sermon 23 February 2025 / 2nd before Lent

Luke 8:22-25, Nehemiah 1-7, Ezra 4

Today's sermon is about stories. Why? Because stories can show us things in a different way. And after all who doesn't like a story?

I will return to today's Gospel, Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, but first I will tell you another story from the Bible, and more precisely from the Book of Nehemiah, a book in the Old Testament. So let us travel back in time to the 5th century BC. This is the situation. The 'known world' was mostly under the power of the mighty Persian Empire. The Jews had been deported to Babylon from Judah and Jerusalem in the 6th century. Some had returned to Jerusalem, but not all of them.

Now let us imagine we are in the household of the king of the Persian Empire with palaces in different cities across modern day Iran and Iraq. In the king's household was a man whose name was Nehemiah. His job was "cupbearer", let me try again, "cupbearer". He was the bearer of the king's cup. He had the simple but delicate task of making sure that the king's drink was safe to drink. The king of Persia at the time was Artaxerxes I. One had to be very careful around Artaxerxes I, as Artaxerxes was known to have killed his older brother Darius because he thought Darius had assassinated his father Xerxes. Even rumours were dangerous around Artaxerxes...

Artaxerxes was weary of the many rebellions within the empire, having to fight back to hold onto power, again and again. Yet one day Nehemiah came to the king and asked him a big favour. Nehemiah was one of the Jews in exile. He wanted to return to his own country and rebuild Jerusalem and its walls. He knew that some people had already warned the king that there were Jews wanting to rebuild the temple ready to start yet another rebellion. Nehemiah also knew the king had previously forbidden rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah still wanted to do this. He could not live with the thought of Jerusalem, the great city of his God, in such a miserable state. But this time something surprising happened... The king allowed him to go to Jerusalem to do what he had asked! Nehemiah was free to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. It was over 100 years since Jerusalem had been destroyed by Babylonians!

So Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, started organising the work and getting things done. He certainly had no time to lose! But, as he progressed, things started to become difficult. There were influential Samaritans and Ammonites, neighbouring people, living around there. When they realised that Nehemiah's project was going very well and progressing fast they became angry and plotted among themselves to fight this project.

But Nehemiah was no fool, nor was he naïve, he sensed their aversion towards the project and himself. What did he do? Be afraid? Be anxious? Flee? Give up? None of these! Nehemiah was a man of faith in the God of the Jews, and so, first of all, he prayed to God, he and all his helpers, with his whole heart. And then... he also set a guard on the walls, which were still far from finished. An armed guard was organised available day and night.

Nehemiah's enemies understood things were going well for Nehemiah. Why let him live even? Why not kill him and the others, and stop the work? Nehemiah was still not afraid, but the Jews working with him were. They kept telling him about their fear, over and over again. But Nehemiah told them: "Remember the Lord who is great and awesome!" And Nehemiah gave them also an instruction on how to best to guard the walls. The guard was well organised and they had the faith in the Lord in their hearts. Did Nehemiah's enemies attack? When they saw that Nehemiah was organised and was not afraid, but rather had faith in God, they did not attack!

Finally, Nehemiah and his helpers completed the building of the walls, but one final problem remained. The big gates to the city were not yet in place! So his enemies could easily enter the city through the spaces left for the gates if they were strong enough! And so Nehemiah's enemies made one last attempt: they could spread rumours about Nehemiah for the king of Persia to hear that Nehemiah wanted to become king. But Nehemiah knew he could trust God so he did not fall into the trap of fear. Eventually, the walls were completed and the gates fixed. The people, understanding that this was the work of God, praised God. Nehemiah was now free to travel back and forth to Persia: his work in Jerusalem completed.

Returning to today's Gospel we can see Jesus and the apostles in a fishing boat. These fishing boats could hold up to 15 persons. The boats were about 8 metres long and 2 metres wide. I estimate the size of the sanctuary here at Christ Church, so not so small but not too big either to be in the middle of the storm. Normally there is little difficulty sailing on the Sea of Galilee,

but that day the waves grew bigger and bigger, stronger and stronger. A few decades ago a storm with waves up to 3 metres high was registered on the Sea of Galilee.

Let us imagine the situation. The apostles had been sailing for a few hours. They did not expect a storm. They had seen Jesus perform many healings in the previous weeks and months, even bringing a young man back to life, but they were surprised that Jesus was unable to predict the weather. Jesus often prayed at night. How come he had to sleep deeply exactly at this point in time? The waves grew stronger. Water started filling the boat and, most importantly, the apostles' muscles began to tighten, their minds became obfuscated. How would they survive? Were they lost? How come this young man Jesus did not care?

We know how the story went. They woke Jesus. He rebuked the storm. Calm was restored. He then asked them about their faith. How come they had so little faith after having been with Jesus and having seen so much? What would have happened if they had had the faith of Nehemiah? Instead of being afraid and instead of blaming their 'Master' for being apparently silent, and seemingly indifferent, they could have learned to work together to bring the boat in the storm safely to shore. They could have learned to trust and face challenges and whatever happens in life with a firm faith in God and a calm mind and steady heart.

In these two stories we can see two ways to live, with or without faith. Here faith is not only the faith of the mind, to believe that Jesus can save, or that God is really present. Here faith is to firmly believe that God cares for us, loves us, even if he does not act in the way we wish or we expect. God provides us with gifts. These God given gifts equip us for the storms of life that we might weather them. We can choose to live without faith. We can choose to live being afraid anxiously trying to make things work and in the meantime be angry with God for not solving our problems for us. Alternatively we can choose to walk through life and the challenges it presents with a deep faith in God, who will never allow any real evil, in his divine wisdom, to happen to us. We will then find ways to face the storms, we will have an inner peace to be able to see the solutions that God presents to us. So let us repeat the words of Nehemiah in our hearts in the storms of life and our lives: "Remember the Lord who is great and awesome!" **Amen.**