

Rebuilding the church

9. Re-discovering God

In Scotland today there is an affordable housing shortage, despite the enormous amount of construction we are hearing that in places like Aviemore people cannot buy or rent affordable housing. We are depopulating and it is projected that the population will fall below 5 million by 2025 despite the influx of peoples from other nations. Morally we live in a very questionable age – promiscuity is rife as is the resultant epidemic of sexually transmitted disease, teenage binge drinking at desperate levels, children out on the streets far too late, drug taking is common place on nearly every street, marital breakup reaping havoc in the emotional development of thousands of children each year. What is happening? What are the solutions?

You know our situation as a nation is not a million miles from the situation faced by Nehemiah – a city crumbled and devastated by political upheaval, no housing, moral and religious distinctives once taken for granted lost over time. What is the answer? More housing? Better education? More incentives for family life? Maybe. For me the answer is clear – we need to rediscover the God who has made us, the God who has laid down principles for the best way for life and living and who sent his son to die and lead us to the place of repentance – the place of turning points, turning from one way of living to his way of living.

How is that going to happen? Governmental policy? Not in our lifetime I don't think. Where then? It has to be seen, experienced and understood through the witness of vibrant church families full of fallen but redeemed people – seeking to live life God's way. Do you agree?

By reviving the fortunes of the city of Jerusalem God was preparing the way for the real transformation that was to come. A transformation of the human heart – released from the grip of selfishness and sin through a demonstration of the goodness of God, the light of his goodness to show up the darkness of hearts and minds without him.

Today we live in an age that focusses on the positives – which in many ways is a good thing. Think positive but sometimes that can be a bit like hiding your head in the sand – the sand of positiveness when things are anything but positive. When the bible is opened and explained great and wonderful things are discovered alongside a clear understanding of what is right and wrong. Now that may sound restrictive but a clear understanding of right and wrong before God is like a ring fence round the ocean of all that is good and permissible but we don't like boundaries – even when they are wide.

When I lived and worked in Pilton, one of the roughest housing estates in Edinburgh, I saw life in the raw. In a topsy turvy world where right was wrong and wrong was right. Within a 500m radius of the centre I worked

in there were drug addicts, children born to incest, gangsters, teen pregnancies, youths bullied into theft, alcoholics, housing so unclean you gagged with the stench when the front door was opened, wife beating, children who did not understand the language of love who would only understand you if you spoke abusively to them. It was life on the edge where the boundaries of God's love had been smashed and people were reaping the ill fruit of that. We in the more suburban places think our lives are better but there is as much heartache there from breaking down the boundaries of God's will— just a different form.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself tells us that the human heart is the heart of the problem for any nation. He said 'it is out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks' (Matt 12:34) and that it is not external things that really make us unclean but Mark 7:21 "from within, out of a man's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly".

So when God is restoring a nation, when God is rebuilding his church, when God is reaching out and touching your and my life for a greater good we should not be surprised that when we begin to see him as he really is we will look at our lives and all for a time we may see is that which is wrong. Does that seem surprising?

It has been interesting speaking with some of the folks

who have become Christians recently – how all of a sudden they begin to see things in their life that is not right, not how God wants it to be. The Holy Spirit has pricked their consciences and they feel guilty and need of change and forgiveness. Of course they do and it does not ever stop unless we start to ignore it. How can we be vibrant in the faith and marked out as God's people if we look in every way – word, thought and deed just like the dark world God came to redeem through his son and his church? We must bear the family likeness – Christ likeness. Doesn't that make sense?

So with these things in mind we can maybe see clearer what is going on in Chapter 9.

When God is re-discovered people weep – mercy is poured out

So when God is rediscovered there is going to be a change of direction. You know how it is, with kids for example when they say sorry but then go and do the same thing again you know they have not understood it or meant it. What is required is a change of heart. So too with us, when we re-discover God we will need to change but really mean it. That is what is happening here Nehemiah's time,

Vs 2b "They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers". I heard Moira-Anne comforting Cameron after he had slightly

scrapped his knee. I scoffed lightly as it seemed a big deal over a little matter. To which I got the reply, '*Name the emotion Calum*', in other words help him to express his feeling on the matter. If I might make a transfer, it is the same with naming our sins, when we want to change direction part of the thing we need to do is know and acknowledge where we have gone wrong in God's sight.

At times we say something was cathartic, it might be to go for a brisk walk to let off steam or something similar. Cathartic comes from the greek word catharos which means to cleanse. In the re-discovery of God as the people of God confess their sin and turn around from their present way of living it is cathartic in the sense that the mercy of God washes them.

Isaiah the prophet speaks for the Lord in his day, here what the Lord says through him, "*Come now, let us reason together,*" says the Lord. "*Though our sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool*". Through a heart change and confession they are katharos, cleansed. It is no surprise that when Jesus came to earth to invite us to come and re-discover God he said repent (change direction, confess your sins and be cleansed) and come believe the good news." Believe in the good news that will change your life forever.

Sometimes we wonder why our live with God is not that hot. God seems distant, our lives ineffective in his

purposes. Many times it is because we have not come to him for the katharos. We have not sought to change our course of action because we want God on our terms not our terms to be God's – isn't that true? And that is a course of action that are slowly but surely leads us away from the glorious purposes of God for our lives and cools our heart for God. The interesting thing is that the more mature our faith becomes the more profoundly aware we become of our failings, our short comings, our sin, our need for mercy but also the enormity of God's grace, patience and his love to forgive my sinful soul time and time again. We hold the two things in tension – sorrow for wrongs but joy in his love. It keeps us from being arrogant and self righteous doesn't it? Life is often about holding two or more things in tension isn't it? Balancing work and family life, understanding God's sovereignty and our responsibility and so on. We also have this balancing in our minds – desire to follow Christ's example in life, falling short of that, sorrow over that yet conscious that we are loved more than we can imagine and live in the light of God's delight in us. I think for us all there is a re-discovery here of God's purpose for us. What will you need to do this week to change? Is there one thing that you need you know you need to work on? Anger? Short fuse? Gossiping? Lying? Lust? Unsavoury speech and conversation in the workplace? Judgementalism? Gracelessness? Alcohol? Greed? Jealousy? Bitterness? Relational issues – cold shouldering someone? Ask God to show you your sin, where the life of Christ is not present in you life? It is the path to

kathros through Christ's shed blood, greater experience of the love and mercy of God, fruitfulness in his service and experience of him.

When God is re-discovered weeping turns to worship – God's character is revealed

Somehow through the tears of sorrow the eyes of the people of Nehemiah's time are clearer, more able to see God, to re-discover him. And what is the picture that is painted?

Beautiful multicoloured picture of God –

- Mighty (vs 6) – who says a word and universes are born!
- Source of all life (vs 6)
- Righteous / Holy / Pure(vs7)
- Knowing each one of us (vs 7-8) – often we are content to keep God at arms length but he wants us to know him as intimately as a parent knows a child
- Powerful (vs 10)
- Leader and guide (vs 12) – there is a life to be lived with God that he will lead us into if we will let him.
- Boundary setter (vs 13ff)
- Provider (vs 15) – I know in my life God has provided in dramatic ways so many times
- Forgiving
- Gracious

- Compassionate vs 17
- Slow to anger
- Abounding in love
- Just Judge (vs 27) – we will one day have to account for the lives we have lived.
- Deliverer (vs 28) – Lord deliverers us spiritually and at times physically from danger.
- Faithful (vs 33) – we will never know the number of times that God has been faithful to us when we have been unfaithful to him.

Now I want each of us to look at this list and ask ourselves just how much of this God we know and have experienced in our lives. This and much more is our God. By faith we can walk into a much greater knowledge and experience of him.

You see, when we enter into worship it takes us beyond ourselves and refreshes us in some home truths about who God is and who we are in the light of that.

Which aspect of God's character do we need to be reminded of for this week – either to encourage us or maybe to take things a bit more seriously.

Worship increases our view of God and therefore how much we can trust him, put faith in him. What are you facing this week? How much does a bigger view of a mighty, sovereign, powerful yet compassionate view of God help you with the week ahead? Is it time to re-discover him?