

## **Rebuilding the church Socio-political involvement**

Today is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the UK.

William Wilberforce conversion to Christianity not only changed his life, it changed his politics. During his life long campaign to end slavery he once said,

*'Never, never will we desist, until we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name, released ourselves from the load of guilt, under which we at present labour, and extinguished every trace of this bloody traffic,'*

Here is a timeline of events

**1562.** *John Hawkins becomes the first known English sailor to obtain African slaves for sale in the West Indies.*

**1786.** *Thomas Clarkson publishes his prize-winning essay on the atrocities of slavery. Clarkson later described a revelation from God as he rode on horseback: 'A thought came into my mind, that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end' (Clarkson, History, vol. 1).*

**1787.** *Twelve Christians form the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, including Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. Prime Minister William Pitt suggests to William Wilberforce that he champion a movement against the slave trade in parliament.*

**1789.** *Former slave Olaudah Equiano publishes The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, highlighting his personal experience of the horrors of the slave trade. Wilberforce delivers his first major abolition speech before the House of Commons.*

**1791:** *Wilberforce's first Bill to abolish the slave trade is defeated by 163 votes to 88. The Bill is defeated a further ten times.*

**1807:** *The Abolition Bill marking the end of the slave trade is finally passed in parliament.*

**1833.** *Slavery is outlawed throughout the British Empire, three days before Wilberforce dies.*

Sometimes the changes we seek to bring may take a lifetime to accomplish and we may experience many setbacks along the way.

That leads us back to the series we have been following in Nehemiah. He spent a considerable part of his life working toward his dream.

It seems that the book of Nehemiah is drawn from the personal memoirs of Nehemiah. We see from verse v14 that Nehemiah became governor for the area and was governor for at least 12 years. But it appears that in the early stages Nehemiah's drive for his high political ideal meant he overlooked the needs of the individuals. But the pressing needs of the people soon came to the fore.

**Nehemiah 5:1-5** *Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup> Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." <sup>3</sup> Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." <sup>4</sup> Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. <sup>5</sup> Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons 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."*

There are several factors at play here – a drought and hence a grain shortage, poor trading relations with immediate neighbouring nations, people may have been working on the walls and not necessarily attending to their farms and they are still under foreign occupation and hence are duty bound to pay taxes to King Artaxerxes irrespective of their financial condition. Such was life in the, agrarian, feudal, Persian occupation of 450BC for the people of God.

Money was short so people were mortgaging their land, borrowing money and even selling their children into slavery in order to survive. Utterly grim but perfect conditions for loan sharks! Praise God for social welfare systems!

I think I have said it before but I would love to be able to travel back to these kind of times to see what it was really like. It's the result of watching too much science-fiction I think!

What then is Nehemiah's reaction when he hears the state of play?

**Nehemiah 5:6-7** <sup>6</sup> *When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. <sup>7</sup> I pondered them in my mind*

What did he ponder?

I wonder if he looked at the book of Leviticus. 'Leviticus!', you might say. Last time I looked it was nothing but boring regulations. Let's look at it together as I think you will be quite surprised,

**Leviticus 25:35-41** <sup>35</sup> "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you. <sup>36</sup> Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. <sup>37</sup> You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit. <sup>38</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of

Canaan and to be your God. <sup>39</sup> "If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. <sup>40</sup> He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. <sup>41</sup> Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers.

Here is an enlightened social policy from around 4000 years ago. It assumes commerce but it is very different from the unfettered life degrading capitalism that dominates the world market at the moment.

The central thought is vs 38. That the people of God were themselves redeemed by God out of Egypt and if they owed anyone anything it was him their very lives! This loving God is also just and put protective measures in the state system for the poor who often do not have the means to defend themselves against the controllers of money. I would love to go into all the details but what I want to draw out is that idea of God having redeemed Israel from it's slavery to Egypt and how that should overshadow all their thinking.

### **God redeems us from slavery**

It was that very idea that really motivated the likes of Wilberforce. He became a Christian at the age of 25. Within three years of his conversion to Christianity he was heavily involved with the abolition of slavery.

Central to Christianity is of course the idea of redemption from slavery. A slave could be redeemed from slavery by paying their worth to their captor. The bible uses the metaphor of slavery not physical slavery but slavery to sin and it's soul destroying hell bound consequences. That on the cross Jesus paid the price and took the consequences (death and hell) of our sin. Hence Jesus said, "*The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt 20:28). We then live our lives redeemed by his love, by his self sacrifice for us. We then owe everything to him – for he paid a price we could never pay. What amount of money or good works to ever redeem our souls? None, that is why Jesus had to die the bible tells us.

Hence Wilberforce could not live with the knowledge that God had set him free from his slavery and would not want to set others free from physical slavery because he is a redeeming God who is just. The slavery trade was unjust and brutal and immoral.

### **Nehemiah stuck to the word**

Nehemiah too was outraged. He looked at God's word and saw that what was happening was wrong. It again reinforces for us that when the church stops taking heed of the word of God it strays back into the standards of the world around – often contrary to God's own standards.

Did you know slavery is still a feature of British life today? In a recent article by the BBC it demonstrated that in 2003 alone 4000 women were imported from other countries on false pretences and sold into the sex industry and some people want to legalise this kind of activity! It is estimated that that number has only increased annually! Around the world? Child slavery in the mines of Ghana are well documented, the list could go on. As we grow and mature as a fellowship socio-political engagement should become an increasing feature of our work. The most important thing is release from our slavery to sin, bringing back the spiritually lost to God but we must also act to temper sins reign and consequences around the world. We are currently doing some work by for example supporting Jean Garland work with folks with HIV and AIDS, supporting World vision projects through our Christmas card project, providing filled boxes for the Blytheswood appeal, supporting Start up and so on but there is more to be done locally and globally. God grant us eyes to see them.

Nehemiah exposes the truth of the situation and the truth of God's word vs 7-8. The nobles are guilty and there is nothing they can say (*Nehemiah 5:8 they kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say*).. The word of God will do that. Often it will encourage but at times it will also rebuke. When it does we need to take note, acknowledge our wrong and make the necessary

changes just like the nobles vs 13 see them true to their word.

### **Nehemiah led by example**

That leads us to the second point that this passage throws up. Firstly socio-political action in the gospel and secondly the need for leaders and Christians who practice what they preach.

Nehemiah had made some tough decisions and had to pull folks up short because of their hypocrisy. But his authority would mean nothing if he was not a man of integrity.

Billy Graham the world renowned evangelist, at a time when some were less than honest, capped his salary for many years. It currently stands at around the same as a secondary school headteacher. It is one of the reason why for some than 50 years he has been able to draw many to still hear him preach.

It was his right as Governor to remunerate himself quite nicely thank you very much from the King's taxes but he did not.

*<sup>15</sup> 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.*

He could easily have used his position to watch the market, gain land and so on and become wealthy in that manner but he did not.

**Nehemiah 5:16** we did not acquire any land.

He could have claimed a catering budget to feed the 150 who daily sat with him at his table but he did not.

*<sup>14</sup> 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.*

*<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. <sup>18</sup> 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.*

He could have sat back and relaxed and let others do the work on the wall but he did not.

**Nehemiah 5:14-19** *<sup>16</sup> Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work;*

Why not?

*<sup>19</sup> Remember me with favour, O my God, for all I have done for these people.*

Nehemiah's only concern was what God thought of him. never mind what the others before him had done or the others around him might be doing.

Is that your or my primary concern? Does the world around us or the word before us inform and transform our action.

He set aside the luxury of the palace court for the rustic life in the relative sticks. He gave up the privileges of position and took a lower status and personal sacrifice for a greater purpose. It was not just word with him it was word and action This one life changed the destiny of a generation.

His Lord, Our Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ took the same path of humility, servanthood and with one life transformed eternity. When he called us to come follow him. it is the path we too are to take. Humility, servanthood and personal sacrifice – setting aside that which is ours by right for a greater good. The extension of the kingdom, the rebuilding of a vital, authentic, God honouring, Christ glorifying and Holy Spirit enabled church. One life can make an eternity of a difference!