

Wednesday in Trinity 18 Week, Year C

Nehemiah 2.1-8

I've never practiced it much, but when I was growing up as a Roman Catholic I used to occasionally read stories about people who prayed to Mary (the Mother of our Lord) for convenient parking spaces while doing the shopping. Sometimes, though, they'd pray to Jesus or God for the parking spot. There'd never be any theological rationale to it, but pray like this they would. Sometimes though, this kind of direct prayer would be for other things, occasionally quite serious things for which you might not have the time to extensively pray. These sorts of prayers are sometimes known as 'arrow prayers' like the Jesus Prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner": the sort of prayer you might pray at any time of the day as part of 'praying without ceasing'.

Nehemiah falls into this category. He is a practical, down-to-earth, bricks-and-mortar guy, and part of his reaction to bad news about Jerusalem is to evidently commit himself to trying to do something about it. But interwoven with this portrayal, the passage makes it clear that he is a man who prays – and prays unceasingly. He probably would be the sort of believer who faced towards Jerusalem at the times of the morning and evening sacrifice, like the prophet Daniel and perhaps even Ezra. We know that when he got the bad news his first reaction was to pray.

The close of that prayer indicated that he knows he has to seek to become the means of doing something about his concern for Jerusalem. This isn't always the case that we become the solution to the problem we're praying about, but there's also the ever-present danger that we pray precisely to avoid responsibility. Indeed in western culture, and I'm sorry to say, the church, prayer is often a mere formality before we solve the problem. Nehemiah's prayer is different. The word for prayer that Nehemiah uses is the word *plead*. It's a word someone would use when pleading for mercy from the courts or to beg for justice. Nehemiah's powerless and his prayer reflects that sense.

Our passage kicks in just after that prayer. He shoots off an ‘arrow prayer’ to God while he’s talking with the king. Nehemiah is actually a high-ranking court official – the butler - with responsibility for the wine-cellar and also for tasting the wine for poison. He’s close to the king. He’s like a confidant and close companion. He’s in a position to make use of his status. He knows this is the moment to take action. He knows he can hardly walk out of his job as the king’s right-hand for domestic affairs. He knows that he needs Imperial authorisation for any endeavour. And he knows that he’s asking for something way beyond his ‘pay-grade’ – he actually would like the king to do as he asks and not the other way around! To have his request granted would be a small miracle in itself. What does he do? He prays. He prays in a short fashion as time allows. And the king... grants his request. Nehemiah, no doubt thanking God, immediately goes into practical details and “the king gave them to me in accordance with the good hand of my God upon me.”

The rest is, as they say, history. But the unceasing prayer...