

**12 October 2025 – Matins**

**Nehemiah 6: 1-16 and John 15: 12-27**

**Mother Emma**

As so often, when people reflect on appointments within the Church of England, many will bring up the relationship between faith and politics. Some might express a sense that senior clergy should not get involved in politics, but others might say that this is the inevitable result of a country with an established church. If our Bishops sat in the House of Lords, but made no comment whatsoever on the situations faced by our country and by the world in the light of Biblical teaching and interpretation, there would be little point to the Lords Spiritual.

I would say that it is impossible for Christians to read, mark and inwardly digest the narratives of the Bible, *“showing forth in their lives what they proclaim with their lips”*, as the traditional prayer goes, without recognising that much of the Bible is directly intertwined with political reflection and action in response to the events of its time. We only have to look at our first reading this morning, the somewhat obscure tale of the re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem following the exile, to be conscious both that the places and the issues discussed are painfully familiar to us today, and that they deal with the outworking of power, propaganda, perception and politics, and yet also that God’s purpose is evident and fulfilled.

We know very little about Nehemiah, except that he was called from amongst the Jewish exiles in Persia, when he worked for the imperial government in the ancient city of Susa (in the south-west of modern Iran) to re-build the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed by the conquering Babylonians a full generation before. The project has been going pretty well and is now almost complete. But Nehemiah needs the full support of his people to help him achieve it, and he is conscious of a threat from those outside who are wary of the influence or intentions of the Jerusalemites. His anxiety focuses especially around three individuals, whom from the start of chapter 4 of the book to this point, he has described simply as “Sanballat, a Horonite”, Tobiah, “an Ammonite slave” and Geshem “the Arabian”. These people are clearly foreigners or outsiders, and Nehemiah’s implication is that they are also of low birth, and to be regarded as no-good scoundrels. But the book of Ezra, and other contemporary sources, have led theologians to deduce that Sanballat was actually a senior Persian official, Tobiah was a Jew himself, but whose family’s ancestral lands lay on the far side of the Jordan, and Geshem was in fact “king of the Arabs.” Seemingly, these three individuals set out to intimidate Nehemiah; to demand that he meets with them in order to delay his task; to spread rumours about his lack of loyalty to the ruling Persians.

Meanwhile, according to Nehemiah, they have also bribed a member of his own team to encourage him to take refuge in the sanctuary (a place forbidden to laypeople) in case he is attacked, to create the impression that Nehemiah is both cowardly and sacrilegious. Nehemiah, of course, stands up against all their plotting, and completes the wall, as God

has charged him to do, and declares that all these enemies inside and outside his gates are much cast down by this result.

We have no reason to suppose that Nehemiah was not called by God to re-build Jerusalem – after all, the Holy City was essential to the religion and worship of the Jewish people – but politically we are also aware his detractors may have a reason to fear and wish to undermine the power of the Jerusalemites, whilst Nehemiah himself is not above enhancing a narrative based on the vilifying of others, and the boosting of his own position.

There is no need, in this sermon, to dwell on the echoes we may hear consciously or unconsciously in this passage, about imperial power, the fear, hatred and degradation of outsiders, the use of religion and religious symbols to promote a particular agenda in our own time. It is enough that we are aware that God's power and purpose can be found in all kinds of situations sometimes deemed "political" – the Persian imperial powers enable the re-building of the Temple to maintain the loyalty of those they rule; bureaucrats like Nehemiah, (whose family were exiled from Judah, but who was almost certainly born within the Persian Empire and seemed something of an outsider to those left behind in Jerusalem), take on the job of re-building a place in which God may be worshipped, but also make use of narratives and images which belittle others.

Someone offering prayers at the votive candle-stand this week asked me why the world felt so unremittingly negative at the moment, and why even people who are normally upbeat are struggling to retain a sense of hope and encouragement. It is true that the narratives we hear from around the world, and indeed in our own nation, seem to be full of the kind of criticism, scapegoating and deception we read about in Nehemiah, political and media negativity which can result, perhaps even more than intended, in the perception of others as objects of fear or derision.

Nehemiah is working for God, of that there is no doubt, and this provokes in some around him a sense of anxiety and reproach. But he is perhaps also tempted to compete with their negativity by portraying them negatively himself.

Jesus warns his disciples in our Gospel that they may well become, like him, people treated with suspicion and hatred for his name's sake. But they are simply to love one another, as he has loved all of us. And the Holy Spirit, who will come to them as a Comforter, will be the Spirit of Truth.

It is easy to get embroiled in the different narratives we hear all around us, to assume instantly that one is right and another wrong, to find scapegoats before we consider our own failings or preconceptions, or to speak before we have truly listened, whether to God or to people. Christian involvement in politics is surely to be guided by the Spirit of Truth, to view both people and world events with consistency, honesty, sincerity and love, and to work, in whatever context we find ourselves, for the true peace and justice of the Kingdom of God.