**SERMON LENT 3 COTTENHAM 4.3.18**

Nehemiah Chapter 9: Combatting Conspiracy

A weather forecaster on BBC Midlands television was very appropriately and ominously named Sarah Blizzard. Clearly Sarah was born to the job! At one time in our German partner parish we had a colleague named Michael Himmelreich. *Himmelreich* means ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ in German. What else could Michael have been but a Lutheran pastor? I once had a Roman Catholic opposite number called Gerrard MacSpirit. He was clearly born for the priesthood. Gerrard always used to dodge behind the safe walls of the supermarket shelves when we were both out shopping to avoid talking to me in public. Our main bone of contention was whether I was in his parish or he was in mine. Like Nehemiah and those conspiring against him, we had a sort of dispute about boundaries. But Gerrard and I also had something in common. We were both stubborn hard-nosed old Lancashire lads trying to work together as fellow Christians in one of Derbyshire’s most deprived mining communities. We were both trying to rebuild and defend walls; walls of both the churches with gates open to the community so as rebuild and re-empower both.

We clergy pray constantly for the power and comfort of the Holy Spirit in our task of leadership, praying with and seeking to empower those we are to be working with. We also value the comfort of our partner. Irene has been a loving support for me. She taught the miners’ children in the local primary school. She’s a people person and over the years got to know the surrounding families and their stories and helped in opening the church to the school and the school to the church. We need so much to value both Lynda and Martyn here.

Nehemiah’s name incidentally means ‘God comforts or strengthens’. So I take this text from this morning’s Gospel: a

quotation from Psalm 69:9

*‘It is zeal for your house that has consumed me: the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’.*

So Nehemiah the Jerusalem wall- builder gave me much food for thought after the Bishop of Derby one day rang me. I thought ‘What have I done now!’ This is how it all began. He basically said, ‘You’ve been Rector where you are for 16 years. It’s time you should think about a move. As Rural Dean you have wider responsibilities for the area. With all your experience we think you are the person to sort out the struggling part of your deanery. But you need to be there. I want you to move there’. Nehemiah went to Jerusalem with the authority of the Persian Emperor. I went with the backing, the power and authority of the Bishop. What he didn’t know was that I had already decided something had to be done there. There was building to be done.

This was the time between the miners’ strike of 1984 and the closing of the last local colliery in 1993. Already vulnerable, relatively isolated communities were facing the progressive removal of their economic base, their *raison d’etre* and their very survival. Nehemiah like, we had to begin to marshal all the resources at our disposal and rebuild the walls. Like Nehemiah I was an outsider with a vision and a passion for the mission of the church – its part in restoring the security and well being of community and of family life. Nehemiah faced opposition from Sanballat - local officialdom- and from his associates: Geshem the Arab; an unsympathetic outsider and Tobiah with his Jewish name – opposition from within the faith.

My specific task within the whole generation effort was to marshal the mission capacity of the village churches. Just taking one village for example. We called it the village God forgot. It had lost its colliery about six years before the strike. All the shops had closed. The Post Office was threatened. There were no surviving pubs. The Miners’ Welfare had gone bust. In County Durham they had scheduled ‘D’ villages like that – scheduled for demolition like Nehemiah’s walls. Where was what little social capacity remaining? It was in the local parish church. For me, protecting the local parish church is crucial for our Christian mission and the wellbeing of a local community. In that village the parish church ran or supported all the groups for both young and old – all except the cricket club.

Nehemiah’s mission was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem amid what was effect greater Samaria, whose centre of loyalty was not there but on Mount Gerizim. Sanballat, the leader of the conspiracy against Nehemiah was most likely from Haran. His faith would be based on the story of Abraham’s mission south into Canaan. It was on mount Gerizim, the story goes, that Abraham, in obedience to God was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, when God provided a ram as a substitute. The Lamb of God. Gerizim and not Jerusalem would be for him the true temple, not Jerusalem. But greater Samaria was a diverse place, a place of immigrants and people of many origins, a multicultural society. Politics, war, exile and sadly religion had divided the Israelites as it has the Christian Church; built internal walls like those which still divide Christians from each other.

But perhaps in the ecumenical Lent groups you might ponder, as I have, this passage from St. John chapter 4: the conclusion of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan women at the well:

*‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.*

Pondering this, I had to plan to build the Christian walls in the right place: quite a risky business. I vividly remember the first meeting of local church leaders I called at the vicarage. The Catholic Priest, the Methodist Circuit minister, the Salvation Army Captain and the Assemblies of God Pastor. It was all very polite and friendly, and we agreed to meet regularly. But there was that underlying suspicion of each other. At the next meeting there was a new Catholic Priest – Fr. Frank - one of those very human expansive hospitable characters with a taste for whisky. The Pentecostal Pastor regarded the Catholic Church as simply antichrist and said so. He was the survivor of the local, closed railway mission – a simple retired working man with a deep Christian commitment for serving the needs of vulnerable people. And the Pentecostal church under his leadership did it well.

But the two of them took a shine to each other. And instead of being co-conspiritors they learned to laugh together and were the bond that held us all together; to value what each of our churches was doing in service to God and our neighbours. We visited each other’s events, worshipping regularly together and appreciating our different ways of worshipping God in spirit and in truth as we saw it. Fr. Frank and the Pentecostal Pastor helped us to be a complementary rather than a divided Christian presence. We were building walls round where God wanted us to be.

But in rebuilding the walls in a different place I faced a conspiracy in my own Church of England parishes. To concentrate our resources we had effectively created an Anglican team ministry – three clergy and four lay readers to server all six churches. We met each month to pray together, to think through problems and allocate services. One parish of about 2,000 people complained to the bishop that they wanted their own vicar as they always had had. The Bishop politely replied that there weren’t the resources to give them one.

Yet they continued to be a thorn in the Team’s flesh.

But the worst conspiracy was in our largest church. A group who had colonised the church from outside tried to groom me to be their own pet priest and when I refused they began to recruit supporters. My first sin was to stand in for the Methodist Minister who was ill. I celebrated communion for them in their chapel, and invited Anglicans to join us. I pointed out that this was perfectly permissible under article 44B of the Church of England Canons. Anyway I regularly celebrated communion in the old folks’ home without asking who was who. The communion table is the table of the Lord. It’s Christ’s table and doesn’t belong to any one denomination. But the conspirators niggled on.

The crunch came when the Diocesan Bishop assigned himself to celebrate at a confirmation service in the parish. The conspirators objected because the Bishop had committed the cardinal sin of ordaining women. He had dirty hands they said. Of course I refused to ban our Father- in- God from the parish. It was rather useless to point out that the General Synod had voted in favour of the ordination of women and that was our authority and not the Pope. But like Nehemiah, I was determined to continue to rebuild the walls where I believe God wants them.

Things came to a head at the next Annual Parish Church Meeting. The conspirators had dominated the PCC. When I asked for nominations to the new Parochial Church Council, they sat in stony silence. So we sat in silence together. It’s often in the silence that God speaks and the spirit moves. Soon I had a full PCC and before long the conspirators had gone. We could continue building the walls.

Just an epilogue to this personal tale. Suffering a Conspiracy can be isolating and so often we are tempted to put up defensive walls. Conspiracy is very different from when a faith leader hears the wisdom of a critical friend alongside them; a friend or partner willing to challenge and advice and willing lovingly to challenge our mistakes; asking the questions we haven’t or daren’t ask; helping us like a weather forecaster, or looking to see who or what might be round the corner. Yet always seeking to reinforce and share and clarify our vision. Conspiracy attempts to undermine that vision, weaken our resolve and to do so in often aggressive opposition. Nehemiah was challenged into battle outside the walls that he was building. He refused. He knew the conspirators were the tip of the Samaritan iceberg and his walls would not withstand the onslaught of a bandwagon. He stood his ground and would not venture onto theirs. His vision came first and nothing could shake it.

In Lent we spend five weeks anticipating the events of Holy Week and Easter; how Jesus rode through the gate of Jerusalem with his vision of the Kingdom of God and made his challenge to the temple. He was greeted by an ecstatic crowd. But the religious authorities who conspired against him turned that crowd against him and they shouted ‘crucify him’. And not only Judas but his closest companions deserted him. In Lent we may perhaps ponder whether or not we may also have been in that crowd.

Remember that quotation from psalm 69 in this morning’s Gospel:  ***‘It is zeal for your house that has consumed me: the insults of***

# those who insult you have fallen on me’

“Crucify him” they shouted. The conspirators thought they had won. But just as Nehemiah in God’s name finished his walls, so St. . John tells us of Jesus’ cry in triumph from the cross: ‘*It is*

*accomplished!’* The wood of Nehemiah’s gates were there to keep

God in. The wood of the Cross is for ever open to released God for the world.

*‘It is accomplished’!* We are called to boldly carry that Cross of divine love before the world.

A prayer.

Heavenly loving Father of all,

Secure our faith against all those who would conspire to undermine it it. Comfort and strengthen us in our faith and witness and our Easter joy. Let your love open the gates of our hearts and of our church so that Christ may freely come and go; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever one God, now and forever Amen.

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