

Keeping Momentum – Nehemiah 4

On Friday morning we woke up to tremendous news from the Winter Olympics in Pyeong Chang – Britain had its first medal, and it was a bronze for the 100-1 outsider Dom Parsons, in the men’s skeleton. For those of you unacquainted with the skeleton event, it is essentially plummeting head-first down a steep and treacherous ice track on a sled more akin to a tea-tray. During the race, riders reach speeds of over 80 miles per hour with a g force of 5. And apparently, we Brits are pretty good at this event, with the reigning women’s Olympic Champion Lizzie Arnold widely predicted to take a medal too.

But it’s been a week of controversy in the British camp with the Americans questioning the legality of Great Britain’s race suits. As you’ll have seen on the TV, all of the athletes wear special figure hugging skinsuits, but the British ones this year feature drag-resistant ridges that improve aerodynamics. Each suit is individually made, and athletes have a 3D laser scan of their entire body to ensure a perfect fit and to cut wind resistance. Why am I telling you all of this, you might be thinking? Well, it’s all about keeping momentum. Once you’ve launched yourself from the top of the track, the highest point - and races are won or lost by the fraction of a second - you need to *maintain* that early momentum and avoid anything that might slow you down. The wind, touching the sides and, of course, crashing!

And it was the same for Nehemiah. In chapter 3, the work was well underway with many of the gates around the wall having been repaired by a multitude of people, all gathered together, inspired and greatly motivated by this man with a vision. Nehemiah understood momentum. He was committed to getting the people moving. He was very serious about seeing the wall around Jerusalem rebuilt and the safety of the people secured. He also knew that momentum could swing at any moment and the work could come to a screeching halt if he was not careful. Nehemiah learned that there were all sorts of things that could kill momentum, and he was committed to finding ways to keep the project moving forward even when resistance was inevitable.

The first opposition Nehemiah and the people faced came in the form of ridicule. At the start of chapter 4, we read *‘When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the walls, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, ‘What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they*

offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?’ And then, Tobiah the Ammonite, joins in too. *‘What are they building – even if a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!’* Sanballat and Tobiah had set themselves up as governors of Judah in the absence of anyone else so were deeply threatened by Nehemiah and the thought that Jerusalem could once again become the strong city that it had been before.

How does Nehemiah respond? Just as he did before, when he first heard of the desperate plight of his people in the ruined city and knew he had to do something to help – he prayed, asking God to intervene on his behalf. He actually asked God to let the taunters’ words ricochet and bounce back on their own heads. And, after praying, Nehemiah and the people got back to work. They did not let the harsh and insulting words win the day. They kept the momentum going and got the wall built to half its necessary height. Their goal was in sight.

Ridicule didn’t work, so Sanballat, Tobiah, and their whole gang turn things up a notch. They moved from ridicule to *planning violence* against Nehemiah and the people, the second opposition they faced. We read, *‘they plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.’* It’s one thing for the builders to listen to taunts, but quite another to see troops assembling. To look up from their work on the walls and see the army of Samaria in front of them, armed with weapons, was enough to horrify all but the stoutest members of the team. And this time, it’s the workers, as well as Nehemiah, who pray: *‘We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.’* Praying together in unity – always a good idea – but also taking some action themselves. They knew that God could deliver them, but they also knew that God expected them to do what they could to resist this threat.

So, they’d faced ridicule and the probability of violence, but the third threat to momentum comes from within the people themselves. The people of Judah became tired and discouraged. They finally hit a wall – and it wasn’t just the one they were building! This is what we read: in v10 *‘The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there’s so much rubble that they cannot possibly rebuild the wall.’* For huge stones and a vast amount of debris had to be cleared away before they could continue the extensive building operation. And in verse 11, they feared that their enemies could strike at any moment and kill

them, and finally, in verse 12, being told ten times over by Jews who lived near the city and therefore knew the reality of the situation well, that no matter where they went, their enemies would find them. Nowhere was safe. In short, they were exhausted, dejected, and feeling that the project was too big for them. Momentum was grinding to a slow crawl. The overwhelming task before them, the continual threat of violence, and their increasing fear looked to be winning.

But it seems that not even this low point could stop Nehemiah and the people. In response to the momentum killer of fatigue and discouragement, they took some clear actions. First, in response to the risk of a full frontal attack that the people said could come at any time, Nehemiah mobilised his team by making sure that the most vulnerable parts of the wall were protected by appointed guards. And, by posting these emergency troops at the lowest points of the wall, the menacing army could see that this local army was a force to be reckoned with.

Secondly, Nehemiah considered his options. We read: *'After I looked things over...'* Although he was deeply disturbed by what he saw, he didn't rush into action before he'd properly considered the situation. He thought things through.

Thirdly, Nehemiah shared his faith. He stood up in a public assembly and urged the people, *'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.'* Although their circumstances had changed, the work was more difficult and the enemy more active, the Lord, on who they could depend, was *exactly* the same.

And fourthly, Nehemiah announced his plans. The highly visible emergency protection force had alerted the enemy to their efficient organisation and military strength. The plot for the surprise attack had been foiled. Nehemiah now believed that it was safe enough for the builders to return to their allocated work areas on the wall. But he made sure that, from now on, the *entire workforce* was permanently and efficiently protected, so he divided his team into builders and soldiers. *'From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armour.'* Even the labourers who carried rubble away from the city were supplied with armour and *'did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other.'* Each of the builders had a sword at his side as he worked, and a

trumpeter was on hand to sound the alarm if an attack came. They worked together, and the re-building went on. Momentum was regained. Things were back on track.

What a wonderful example to us all.

What we know about change in every generation, is that, whilst it is a time of great opportunity, there will almost always be opposition. Sometimes that opposition is from without – such as Nehemiah faced from Sanballat and Tobiah – and sometimes, that opposition is from within. Yes, the people were tired and dejected, those who had been working, but there will have been others, without a doubt, who refused to even engage with the rebuilding, those who saw it from the outset as a waste of time. Those who might have said, *'There's no point. The walls will never be as strong. It will never be as good as it was in Solomon's day. There's no point even trying.'*

But Nehemiah overcame opposition from without and within in three ways. He turned to God in prayer, seeking his guidance and will. He reminded the people of how great and awesome their God was. And he called the people to work together in unity. For the strength of the people was that they worked together. Sharing the responsibilities. Sharing the roles. Supporting and encouraging one another. And together, they kept up the momentum and the walls were built.

Jesus knew all about opposition. In our gospel reading today, fresh from the glory of his baptism, hearing those words, *'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'* he finds himself in the desert for 40 days with the wild animals, being tempted by Satan. Like Nehemiah 500 years before, he relies on the knowledge and love of God, his Father, and overcomes the worst of situations.

And, knowing that his disciples, then and now, would face opposition, opposition that would come from without and within the ranks, Jesus' final prayer to God his Father before he faced the cross, was for unity. In John 17, he prays these words, *'I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be as one, as we are one'*.

That they may be as one as we are one.

What might we achieve together if that was our prayer here at All Saints?

Our prayer as we near the completion of our own rebuilding?

As we make plans for the future – to grow in faith, in numbers and in service to our local community?

To pray together, to remember how great and awesome is our God, and to be as one, as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one.

In Jesus' name, Amen.