

**“Now is the time”, a sermon based on Nehemiah 8:1-10 and Luke 4:14-21  
preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on  
23 January 2022.**

I begin by giving some background to the Nehemiah reading. For the people of Israel, life was on hold. They had been defeated by a foreign power and forced from their land ... exiled. They were waiting to return home, to the way things used to be. In the meantime, they tried to adapt, but it was at best ... second best. Their lives were on hold. News from home was not good. A first-hand account put it like this: “The survivors there are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” Nehemiah shared the despair of the people. He sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

But for him, despair did not become discouragement. Despair became determination. He decided that the best of Jewish law and tradition could be renewed ... despite the obstacles, through the obstacles ... perhaps even because of the obstacles. The people weren't so sure. They tried to dissuade him. They said that the conditions weren't right for renewal. And they had a point because misunderstanding and deceit and opposition swirled around.

But Nehemiah was determined. The wall and gates of Jerusalem needed rebuilding. Eventually, he persuaded the king to appoint him governor of the area. Immediately, what the people had warned would happen, did happen. The regional officials in Judah opposed him. But Nehemiah persisted— “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” Then things got even worse. The local officials ridiculed his efforts and questioned his integrity. They rubbished every success. They criticised the quality of the work. They poor-mouthed him. External enemies threatened armed intervention. The workers ran out of energy and wanted to give up. People complained about the cost of the project, more than was budgeted, more than they could afford.

Yet at every turn, Nehemiah's posture was confident, if not adamant. “Do not be afraid. Remember the Lord.” He called the people to a deeper level of hope, to new possibilities in this new context, so they struggled on. Finally, the wall and the gates were completed. People returned from exile. But the city was not what it had been. They realised life was never going to be as it used to be. The temple was in ruins, their city in a shambles, and there was division among

the people. Nehemiah gathered them, thousands of Jews, and held a grand assembly, a holy day celebrated with the reading and interpreting of the law of Moses, hour after hour.

So we come to today's reading, the apex of the story. But the apex was not the restoration of the wall and the gates in itself. It was not the relief of laying the final stone or placing the last brick. It was not people's effort, incredible as it was. No. The apex of the story was the dedication of the wall and the gates to God. Looking back, when there was an inclination to put life on hold, to live in disappointment that life was not as it used to be, Nehemiah tapped a deeper spirit of faith and hope. That did not mean the people experienced instant joy or immediate success. Indeed when Ezra and the priests read scripture to the people for the first time, they didn't celebrate. They mourned and wept. We're not told why. Perhaps the people realised that the good days of David and the united kingdom were past. Maybe they finally understood that what lay ahead was more hard work and uncertain outcomes.

Almost two years ago we thought we would get through the pandemic and return to how things were. We would return to life without masks. We would celebrate Communion as we used to celebrate. We would circulate the offering bags as we used to circulate them. Sunday School would resume. Singing would resume. And, for many, perhaps for all of us to some extent, we put aspects of our lives on hold. We hesitated about commitments. We became careful about mixing with others. It became too hard – the masks, the distancing, the risk. Most churches have experienced decreased attendance, less money in the offering plate, fewer children, and more questions about how to return from the COVID exile.

After two years and with the predictions of what is ahead, with Nehemiah and the people, we have learned that the meantime is how it is and how it will be. Life is not on hold. The church is not on hold. God is not on hold. God does not wait for the conditions to be right.

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites didn't let grief have the final say. The leaders of Jerusalem explain, "This day is holy to the Lord your God." God, it turns out, welcomes the incomplete wall and the smaller temple. God is not waiting for safety, prosperity, and peace before re-entering the people's story. God was with the people in exile. God will be with them, in and through the return. This day will be holy. This day ... this day God calls the people to "eat the fat and drink the sweet wine," to express their faith ... yes with sorrow, lament and

repentance ... but also in celebrating the goodness of God ... and celebrating by ensuring portions of the food and drink go to those who have nothing.

Let me pause a moment and take a brief journey sideways. The Old Testament scholar who lives here in Dunedin, Maurice Andrew, notes a New Zealand connection here. In the middle of the reading are these words: verse 6 "Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered "Amen, Amen", lifting up their hands." Lifting up their hands. Ringatu. Maurice Andrew points out that this verse is the one that inspired the name of the Maori religion Ringatu, the one closest to the Presbyterian Church. Ringatu started in less than ideal conditions. Its leader te Kooti was imprisoned on an island off the East Coast of the North Island and he escaped by capturing a boat and taking others with him. He was pursued by the authorities and it was while he was sheltering in the King Country that he developed the elements of Ringatu. So it became one of the Maori renewal movements.

The same could have been said for the beginning of the Jesus movement in the backwater town of Nazareth. Luke puts Jesus reading Isaiah as the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In reading from the ancient prophet, Jesus invites the people to reclaim their purpose and renew their life even in a difficult situation, "God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." As if to say: the Word lives, here and now. Today. The people in the synagogue must have been thrilled to hear the words of their cherished prophet Isaiah. But then they recoiled in outrage. Debie Thomas suggests that what offended them was the that the time for renewal was now. That they must lean into liberation today. That they could enter into the joy of the Lord today.

This is not life on hold, waiting for the right conditions. Jesus, it seems, doesn't put life on hold. God invites us into the fullness of today, to this and every day God calls holy. In this Christian season of Epiphany, we are invited to look for signs of the life of God in our world ... of light. ... of God's transformative activity. Even when the conditions are not right, God's "now" brims with the possibility of justice and joy, amid the despair. We are invited into these marvellous words, to find here a charter for our lives and for our church amid the pandemic.

Nehemiah ... "This day is holy to the Lord." Jesus ... "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

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