

Most of our married life, Alison and I have lived in the country, and it has so many advantages. Things are quieter, we don't have neighbours getting annoyed at the madness going on every day in our house. I am so glad I live down a lane because I know I won't annoy anyone. Anyway at around this time of the year one of the things about living in the countryside becomes a bit of a pain. It's as the weather gets colder, our 4 legged little friends in the fields (the mice) decide they need to find somewhere warm to live through the winter months. And so usually around this time if you are sitting quietly in our house, you might hear the sound of some of our little friends crawling in between the wall cavities. A few years ago, the mice in the house found a hole to be able to squeeze through so they could move not just through the cavity walls but into the actual house. And so we started noticing droppings in the bedroom – in fact droppings in my bedside drawer as a couple of these furry friends decided it would make for a lovely bed. Now without going into any more detail, let's just say that our little friends are no longer living in the house, but no doubt the next busload will be arriving soon. But my point is that what once was an issue outside that didn't affect us as a family, then became an internal issue that we definitely had to deal with. We know mice can be a problem but they are never a problem if they stay outside. Once they're inside it can cause all kinds of bother.

Up to this stage in our story of Nehemiah, the problems he has had to face with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem have all be external – it came from enemies outside, but now Nehemiah is having to deal with issues on the inside, among his own Jewish people.

For all of us, at some stage in life, we have to deal with the same thing. The issues begin to directly affect us. They're no longer external. There may be conflict that happens directly with us that we cannot ignore. But conflict is inevitable because none of us are perfect. So this morning we are going to look in our passage at some common causes of conflict, and then we are going to look at how Nehemiah deals with these, and therefore how we might learn from that.

So as we look even at the very first verse today we see conflict. Let me read it again – verse 1 – *'Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews'*. It's inevitable, and I see it within church, that when you put a bunch of people together, it will raise issues. But never more is it an issue than when people are stressed with something. The people are trying to rebuild the wall, and since enemies are on the prowl to attack them, they are in a hurry to get it fixed. But since they are spending so much time on the walls, no one has any time to plough the fields and plant crops. And then because of a famine in the land, there are crop failures and therefore a shortage of food. And so into that come issues that need addressing.

So what do we learn from this. Well firstly, **conflict will always occur when a need isn't being met.**

For us, that need could be the economic, it could be relational, it could be in work, or wherever – when the need isn't being met, a person gets annoyed. The people in our story were angry because they had no food. Verse 2 - some were saying, *"We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain"*. So conflict arose because a need wasn't being met.

Next, **conflict occurs when we don't think progress is being made.** The people in our reading were saying "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine". They are going deeper and deeper into debt – there seems no way out. They've come to build the walls, and yet their own internal walls in their lives seem to be crumbling.

Next **conflict occurs when we think our leaders are insensitive to the issues around us.** The people were saying, "*We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards*". They are already in dire need and still they have to pay taxes to a wealthy cruel authority in the middle of the famine. Maybe this resonates strongly today in our society with the budget last week. Did any of you see the interview this week by BBC Radio Yorkshire with our prime minister Liz Truss? The interviewer welcomed the prime minister for joining her, gave her such an opening introduction, and then dropped the bomb by asking her what had she been doing in this past week, not to have had any interviews on the budgets, or not seem to have any sense that her government were so insensitive to the damage caused throughout the country. People are very angry today aren't they? I wonder today do you feel that our leaders are completely insensitive to the needs around us right now?

So conflict arises when needs are not being met, when there doesn't seem to be any progress, when our leaders appear completely insensitive, and the final example of conflict will occur **when we feel completely powerless to changing our situation.** When you see others around who seem to be making headway, and yet for you, you are hardly able to survive, that brings about conflict. It is frustrating that some in society seem to be thriving while others are not. The people were angry that because of the famine they were forced to put their children into slavery just so as to bring food into the house, while wealthy landowners were exploiting all of this. Let's read Verse 5 "*Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.*"

I'm sure these examples resonate today – because I don't think there is any difference today – especially in the times that we are going through right now. You might know of people who are so angry because of the huge unfairness and divide that's going on between those that have and those that have not.

And so into this we see the character of Nehemiah trying to address this – God had given him an ability to speak out against the injustices, and people knew they could trust in him. I hope as we now look at how he responds, that we can see how we can also respond to conflict in a different way in our own contexts. We can be a different voice that can be relied upon, and we can be a powerful witness for the restorative work of Jesus that frankly our broken society needs to hear in these days.

So let's now look at the way in which Nehemiah brought stability in the midst of conflict, and how we too can walk this way in our own lives.

Firstly you and I need to be people with empathy

If you respect the feelings of other people, they are going to respect you. When people are hurting, when people are grieving, or when people are fearful, they need to know that you feel their pain. Very often in my pastoral visits with people they don't care about any great theological understanding I might have, they want to know that I first and foremost care ! It's funny that at home, so often as a man I want to be able to fix problems that Alison brings to me, but 99.9% of the time, Alison is only interested that I care enough to give her time to talk about it. Nehemiah could have walked with solutions, but instead he empathised with the people who were complaining. Verse 6 Nehemiah said "*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry*". He's not just a little upset, it says he is VERY angry.

So let's not be people who feel we always have to fix problems that people bring to us, instead let's feel how they are feeling. Nehemiah understood why the people were angry. It doesn't mean his anger brought him to sin. It was a righteous anger – because of his love for the people, he was angry to see how they had been mistreated. Ephesians 4:26 says to be angry but not sin. So there's a way of being angry about something but not to be sinful through it. There's a distinction between a righteous anger and a sinful anger. Sinful anger means that I get bitter because you have hurt me, and so I resent it. Righteous anger is when I get angry over someone else being hurt. Nehemiah gets angry at what he sees because he saw the unfairness on these people.

When you see people who are being mistreated, does that disturb you? If you want to be respected, then empathise with people's feelings – you may not agree with their conclusions – but feel for them.

Secondly, it's important to think before you speak.

In verse 7, Nehemiah says "*I pondered them in my mind*". In other words he thought everything through first before responding. He didn't just go off half-cocked, no he thought before he spoke. Proverbs 15:28 says "*The godly think before they speak, but wicked people quickly spout evil words without ever thinking*". Remember we all have 1 mouth and 2 ears. So how often do you sit and listen to God before you respond with words from your mouth?

Next, in a place of conflict, try to resolve it privately first.

Think for a minute about things that have annoyed you about someone else. How often have you made sure to talk with them first, before you have spoken to someone else about them. Nehemiah did this so right. He starts to personally build a bridge with those who were exploiting the poor. Verse 7, '*I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them*'. Notice that he didn't start with the large meeting. He goes to the people who are offending others. He treats his enemies with dignity even though they are in the wrong.

Folks this is how we are meant to deal with conflicts. And no greater instructor is there than Jesus - Let's look at Matthew 18:15-17 *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, **just between the two of you**. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, **take one or two others along**, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'* 17 *If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church;*'.

Is that how we deal with conflicts and disagreements in the church today? When you have an issue about something do you sit privately with the person, do you then bring a friend along to try to resolve it? No, we will likely have expressed our annoyances to many people first, so that others know and hopefully fuel your justification for feeling angry. That is not how we as a church are meant to operate. Folks, when you have conflict with someone, don't gossip about it, don't go talking to everyone else, go and speak to the person in private to try and resolve it, and then open it up to others to help. That's what Nehemiah did.

So then finally, Nehemiah does one other thing, and that is to **do everything with humility and generosity**.

Nehemiah ends with his own testimony. Verse 14 – *'for twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor'*. The previous governors got all the perks, but not Nehemiah. He was a man of character. And he goes on in verse 16, *"Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land"*. He was saying that none of them were making money from their position. Where folks are leaders like that today?

This teaches us a lot of humility and generosity. Nehemiah rejected any sense of entitlement, and he made absolutely no demands for his position. No wonder Nehemiah was respected – it was because he never lorded over others, he empathised, he listened. That's what we should be as people of a generous loving God. Can you imagine if as we are disobedient with God, he wouldn't listen to us, he wouldn't empathise with us, and he wasn't generous in his grace. We all know that is not how God is. And so for us, let's give up our own rights so as to serve Jesus Christ in all humility and bring glory to him.

So let's wrap this up. Here's a question - what will people remember about your life when you are gone? What legacy will you live? Did we do any of these things? Will our community look at us within this church and see us as a blessing? Can you say that today? Do you think people respect us as a church in Ballynure and Ballyclare? Do you know if individually you are being a blessing to others through your witness, or do you not actually care? Folks there are many things in this society that are so wrong, but we as God's people can work for good. Will you therefore let God fill you with a heart for some area of compassion and change to help those that don't have a voice. The world today is looking for people that they can trust, because they certainly don't trust those in leadership. In fact that is why anything that seems authoritative gets a bad reputation today. May our church, and our mission, give people a sense of hope in knowing that they can trust us. The world is looking for people who have integrity and credibility. And it starts with you and me.

So here are 4 things to consider into this week ahead :

1. Ask God to help you be a more empathetic listener – God help me not to just have an answer, but instead help me just to listen and hear the feelings of others, and identify what it feels like.
2. Ask God to help you pause and think every time before you speak – remember we have 2 ears to listen and only 1 mouth.
3. Ask God to resolve conflicts with individuals, not going off talking to others about it.
4. Ask God to help you to walk with humility and generosity into each and every day.

Let me pray.

Father we need people in this world that live in this way, especially in our broken society. You want us to be the solution. Help us to do the things that Nehemiah did – that we would be gentle rather than judgmental. We can't do this on our own, we need the power of your Holy Spirit. We hope through it people will see a church full of credibility and respect. Help us to get angry about things that are wrong in the world. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Study Questions – Nehemiah 5:1-16

1. In what ways is God's concern for hurting people revealed in this passage?
2. How do you respond when someone reveals a struggle or suffering? What does it look like for you to balance self-care and compassion for others? (Philippians 2:4, 1 Corinthians 3:16)
3. How do you handle conflict? Do you fear it? Do you see it as a positive or negative thing?
4. As you listen to the News, do you observe injustice and suffering in our society, or are we becoming too pre-occupied with our own struggles? How do you demonstrate righteous anger when you see things that are wrong and unjust?
5. Part of the solution to disagreements is to take responsibility for your part of the problem. Is that difficult for you to do? Why?
6. Jonny outlined 4 practical ways to be a witness of integrity and reliability in your life today. There were
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 - b. Ask God to help you pause and think every time before you speak – remember we have 2 ears to listen and only 1 mouth.
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 - d. Ask God to help you to walk with humility and generosity into each and every day.

Which of these do you think will be most challenging?