

We've been thinking over recent weeks in our readings from Nehemiah, the impact that hearing God's word has on his people.

And on a day like this where remembrance is at the forefront of our minds, we see again in our reading from Nehemiah 9 how the people, reflecting on God's word, remember how through generations of their ancestors they need to now come in fasting and repentance and prayer in response to their disobedience. The confession that these people embrace is much more than our short prayer that we make each week. Let me read again those words from verse 3, *'They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God'*. Folks, that's 6 hours reading the word, and 6 hours in confession and worship. In fact the prayer in Chapter 9 is the longest prayer within the entire bible – it was a chance to remember, to reflect and repent.

Whilst we have not read the entire chapter, there are I think 3 words that have emerged from this prayer, because they take us through the stages of the human condition and God's solution to our sin. Those words are **failure, forgiveness, and faithfulness**. We fail, God forgives, and he remains faithful in his love to us.

So let's look at the first word **failure**. Failure is our problem.

Let's look at some verses that we read. In the opening section of the prayer, we hear of all that God has done for his people throughout history, but then in verse 16 we read, *"But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. 17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery"*.

Over and over again the theme is the same. Their prayer is saying that's there's one thing God's people have been consistent at, and that

is sinning. But let's face it, it's not just them is it? All of us are consistent at sinning every day. Human history is littered, scarred by, and marked by failure. Today is a day when we recognize the direct affect of sin in the world, where nations have not loved their neighbours as themselves, but instead have waged war against each other. And all of this can be summed up in one little verse in Romans 3, verse 23, *"for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*

All have sinned. Not some, not a few - all have sinned. It is the craving of humanity to have what they want at any price. CS Lewis said this *"Money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery – the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy"*.

The many war graves that are spread across large parts of Europe speak so clearly of the history of humanity. And the history of humanity is the history of sin, and the history of humanity's battle against sin. The Bible records sin entering and then spreading out in all directions. Sin begins in Genesis and then culminates in Revelation. The Bible is essentially a journal of human failure and God's plan to rescue us from that failing.

Paul reminds us in Romans 5 that, *"just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."* In other words, sin entered through Adam, and it's been hanging around ever since. Through Adam the image of God became distorted in every single human being. It wasn't long after the incident with the apple that we read of how that sin permeates into the next generation and before you know it, one brother kills the other.

You see when wars occur across history, we should not be in any way surprised by it, because humanity has always been inclined to battle against one another for control. Yes today we remember those that have defended against evil, but it's not new. It's called fight against sin. In fact the word sin, in all of its forms; sin, sinners, sinning, shows up no

less than 629 times in the pages of scripture. And that's because the Bible knows the reality that is our history - We have a nature of sin.

Once we grasp that, the world makes more sense. I mean, why is it that after thousands of years, or why is it after 2 world wars in the very same century where approximately 65 million people died, that we still haven't learnt our lesson, and the stories of more wars continue to dominate our news papers? It's because like the Israelites, we live in a world full of sin, of huge failing towards God's plans, and therefore we will always have Hitlers, we will always have Putins, until the day of the Lord's return. Humanity has failed.

But on days like today, where we recognize how cruel humanity is to one another, we are thankful as God's people that **forgiveness** is available, which is our second word.

Let's look at verse 17 again. *'They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. **But** you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them'*.

It's a pivotal rescue plan for humanity. Notice that word 'But' – 'But you are a forgiving God'. The failings throughout our history meets with God's invitation for forgiveness. We are failures, but you are God. Oppressors have sinned, but you are God. Nations have blown it over and over again in all of our history, but you are God. And as God, he is so much bigger than our failure.

Yes God is a God of justice, and those that have sought to gain more and crush many will have to account for their actions. But he also desires that people will repent and turn away from evil. The very first words uttered by Jesus when he was put on the cross, a man of no sin brought to a place of punishment by the very people he came to save, said this, 'Father forgive them. They don't know what they're doing'. Of all the things he could have said, why those words? Because forgiveness

is our greatest need. Father forgive them. Remember that our Father God wants a relationship with us, but it requires us and the nations of the world to come and seek his forgiveness.

And so the people in our reading make confession towards God. To confess means more than temporarily feeling bad. Repentance is turning from something and turning to someone. So God is ready to pardon our sins, and the sins of nations.

On 1st September 2019, the then German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier attended an early morning ceremony in a small Polish town called Wielun, marking 80 years since the Nazi German invasion of the Polish people. Few places saw death and destruction on the scale of Poland. It lost about a fifth of its population, including the vast majority of its 3 million Jewish citizens. In an incredible moving speech, Steinmeier said these words, *“As a German guest I walk before you here barefoot. I look back in gratitude to the Polish people’s fight for freedom. I bow my head [now] before the victims of the attack on Wielun, I bow my head in front of the Polish victims of German tyranny and ask for forgiveness. I profess to our lasting responsibility”*.

Such a confession was an incredibly important step in reconciliation. But I’m guessing like any situation, there will be some who will never be able to forgive. Some of those grieving families may think that Germany can never be forgiven for what they did to their ancestors. And in the same way, within our own country, there will be some who will never be able to forgive those that caused such bloodshed over the Troubles. However our reading today reminds us that our God forgives even them. But not only is he forgiving but he is also gracious and merciful.

Grace is getting what you don't deserve. But mercy is not getting what you do deserve. So in mercy, God withholds the judgment we all deserve. He is full of grace and mercy towards the IRA bomber, he is full of grace and mercy towards President Putin, he is full of grace and

mercy towards each one of us. And in grace, God adds the blessing that no one deserves.

As we remember the many who were willing to put their lives at risk for the sake of our freedom, I think it is important to remember God's ultimate cost in Jesus Christ, the love, the forgiveness, the grace so that we would be freed from our failures.

I want to demonstrate the depths of that forgiveness in a little story.

Nicky Gumbel, the founder of Alpha tells of two men who grew up as best friends, except that their lives took divergent paths. One became a judge, and the other a criminal. At one point the criminal ends up in the Judge's court. He is obviously guilty, but he was the judge's friend. If the judge let him off, he would not be fulfilling his role of dispensing justice.

So what he did was he sentenced his friend to the appropriate fine for his crime, but he then stepped down from the bench, took off his robe, and wrote his friend a cheque for the amount of the fine in full. He knew he deserved the fine, but then in order to show his deep love for his friend he pays the fine himself.

This is what God does in Jesus. He sentences us to death for our failings, but then steps down from heaven and pays for our sins in full with his death.

So in our failings, in humanity's failures, God is all forgiving. But let's now finish by considering his **faithfulness**.

Faithfulness is a promise. And here's what's amazing about this prayer in our reading today. God's love is so different than anything we could ever know, in that, even though we fail over and over again, God keeps pursuing us, keeps following us, keeps forgiving us, keeps loving us. It's not once, it's always. It's his faithfulness.

Let's read again from our passage. Verse 32 & 33, "*Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of*

love..... In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.”

Here's the truth of all of this today. God's love is unstoppable. God's love is unrelenting, unending, unconditional. It keeps going. It keeps pursuing. Our reading today shows that even when the people ran from God, even when they rebelled against Him, even when they repeatedly replaced Him with idols, even when they settled in the land of Canaan, and kept rejecting Him, yes He sent them into captivity, but He heard their cries, and now as they stand again in Jerusalem with walls restored, they remember that God has brought them back. Even in their rebellion, he is full of grace, and he is ever faithful.

As we consider today the cruelty of man, we also consider the depths of God's love for his creation, even in their failing. Let me read to you how deep his faithfulness is. I'm reading from 1 John 3, verse 16, *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”*. None of us can fully comprehend how deep a love this is. Human history has proven, and continues to prove it today, that we will never be capable of such love. But God loves you so much and is so faithful in his love towards us because it is simply who he is. The reason he is faithful is because he cannot be anything else.

And so as the people recognize their failings, as they receive God's forgiveness, and as they begin to comprehend God's ongoing faithfulness, our reading finishes with these remarkable words from the people. *“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it”*.

The people entered into a new agreement with God to not return to the wickedness of many generations. Would they remain faithful to this? No, they would eventually turn against God's own son and nail him to a cross. But many along the journey would turn and realise the saviour that had come. Oh if on this Remembrance Sunday, the nations

of the world would only recognize their failings and their own participation in creating a world so set for self-destruction, that they would miraculously turn towards a loving God who is so full of grace and mercy as to forgive them for what we all have done to one another.

Today we may feel that we have had no part to play in the wars that we remember, and yet in many ways each and every day we destroy the image of what God created us to be – people who are called to love one another in the way that he loves us. Like the people in the square in Jerusalem hearing the word of God, may each one of us consider our own failings and come afresh and seek the forgiveness of our faithful God this day. In our period of RESET, may we consider making a personal binding agreement to follow a road of peace and love with our brothers and sisters, and walk closely with the Lord. May God give you the strength as you follow him.