

READING

Nehemiah 6: 1-19

SERMON

No Intimidation!

There is a person here who could be the descendant of a traitor – one who caused this country grief and maybe for some heartache. It was one who tried to intimidate this country during the last World War.

[Sound clip: Lord Haw Haw, William Joyce, 1945, Radio Hamburg]

That was Lord Haw Haw calling from Germany, as he had done during the Second World War.

Lord Haw Haw or William Joyce was American with an Irish father and English mother. During the Second World War he went to Germany and broadcast to Britain designed to intimidate and sap the resolve of the British people.

But I said that there is a possible descendant of Lord Haw Haw here in this room. Would that person please stand up? Yes it is Sue because here grandfather was William Joyce, not I hasten to add the one of Lord Haw Haw infamy, but William Joyce all the same.

There are many ways to intimidate or frighten people and in the passage we read together the word *frighten*, translated more often as *intimidation* occurs four times. Firstly in verse 9

“They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.”...” (Nehemiah 6:9 NIV)

Then in verse 13, followed by verse 14

“He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.” (Nehemiah 6:13 NIV)

“Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.” (Nehemiah 6:14 NIV)

Finally in verse 19

“Moreover, they kept reporting to me his good deeds and then telling him what I said. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.” (Nehemiah 6:19 NIV)

The enemies were getting worried, the wall was virtually completed by mid September 445 BC and Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Arab could see their power, their hold over the place slipping away. If the gates went up, then Jerusalem would be secure once again and far more difficult to get into. So the intimidation starts, not via radio as in the case of Lord Haw Haw, not in the use of television as would be used today, but using other methods.

- **Decapitate**

Firstly there is the plan to kidnap or even kill Nehemiah – to remove the one at the head, to ‘decapitate’ the people of Jerusalem. Verse 2

“Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me;”
(Nehemiah 6:2 NIV)

Seems a reasonable request. But Nehemiah turns it down. He is not being tolerant, he is not being reasonable. They ask for him to go and meet them four times. There are times when being a Christian means that one cannot be tolerant, one has to make a stand. Some churches around here have over the years been hosting ESOL classes run by the Redbridge Institute for some thirty years or so, but now have been told that because they are not prepared to have a multi-faith prayer room on their premises they will no longer be holding the classes there. The leaders of these churches have complained about this but are not prepared to have a multi-faith prayer room on their Christian premises, just as when they talk to the local Rabbi or Iman, they would not have multi-faith prayer rooms on their premises either. Is this a situation where tolerance takes place or not?

Nehemiah refused and gives the reason as pressure of work. We have to remember that it would have taken Nehemiah a day to travel to Ono, then a day of talks and then a day to travel back. So he would have been away for three days at least. Also Ono was near to dangerous territory and so it would have been easy to have killed Nehemiah and then blamed the Philistines.

So often Satan does attack the minister in a church, because that will have a great effect on the church, so do pray for ministers that they may close to God and not let themselves be pulled away.

- **Malign**

So they try another tactic – that of maligning him by spreading false rumours about him. Verse 5

“Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his assistant to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

Note that the letter was unsealed. So if you were the messenger, what would you do? And then when you have read it, as Sanballat’s assistant – what might you do next? So now that you have told everyone you meet about the letter, the rumours are flowing thick and fast because the letter says, verse 6

“It is reported among the nations— and Geshem says it is true— that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.” (Nehemiah 6:5-7 NIV)

I like the little touch - **and Geshem says it is true** - so therefore it must be true. So what did Nehemiah do? He followed several steps, just as we should

1. Examine Accusations – firstly he examined the accusations. He looked at them and did not just dismiss them. He needed to look at them and see if they were viable or not, or if they held any veracity or not.
2. NO Retaliation – Nehemiah refutes the allegations, verse 8

“I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.” (Nehemiah 6:8 NIV)

There is no nastiness, no retaliation, no revenge as we are told not to take retaliation with falsely accused, no matter how tempted.

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:17-21 NIV)

That should always be our course of action. Also the Bible tells us, rather than retaliate, to pray for the accuser

““You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”
(Matthew 5:43-44 NIV)

That can be very hard, especially when you are hurting a lot because of what someone has said, especially if it is a false accusation, as in the case of Nehemiah.

And we are also to pray for oneself in this situation. To be patient with those who accuse, to know the words of Proverbs where it says

“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
(Proverbs 15:1 NIV)

And also

“Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32 NIV)

Here Nehemiah prays for himself and also for his fellow workers and I think it is a great prayer. It is very short, but one of those that says so much. Verse 9, last part

“... But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”” (Nehemiah 6:9 NIV)

What a great prayer - **Now strengthen my hands** – we should all be praying that as we seek to Build For The Future as a church, seeking to tell others about what Jesus has done for us and how his Holy Spirit is with us at all times.

3. Good from Evil – We also know that God can make good come from what others thing will come evil. Romans 8:28 says

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 NIV)

- **Discredit**

However the plan of Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem did not end there. They then used enemies within to try and intimidate. Verse 10

“One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”” (Nehemiah 6:10 NIV)

Again we seem to have a reasonable, logical sensible request. Nehemiah, you are in danger, why not go to the Temple and hide in there – you'll be safe there. We are not sure who this Shemaiah is, even though we have his heritage, or why he is indoors. Was he barred from the Temple? Was he disabled? We do not know, but Nehemiah realises that it was a trap to discredit him by intimidating him. The frighteners are put on him – someone is going to kill you – in order to then get him to act in a way that would discredit him.

Yes the Temple would have been a great place to hide, but only priests were allowed in the Temple and Nehemiah was not a priest and so if Nehemiah had gone in he would have been discredited by going against God's law.

Beware the enemy within the came, and Satan will be there. None of the disciples suspected Judas Iscariot. Presumably no-one knew of Shemaiah's treachery and he lay dormant waiting to catch Nehemiah out.

People are so ready to pull someone else down it seems. The newspapers are very quick to splash the story of a minister or vicar over their pages when they do something wrong. Sadly the press is never very swift at giving the good news. I hope that you pray for ministers because Satan does target them because if the minister can be discredited, then the church is so often discredited. I have known church having to change their names because the minister has ended up in prison.

So Nehemiah turns the prophet down, nicely, but firmly and carries on with life. Then we are told that he is not the only one, verse 14, another prayer of Nehemiah's

“Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.” (Nehemiah 6:14 NIV)

All these people trying to stop the work – some saying that they had words from God, that they were prophesying, but they were actually in the pay of the enemy. Beware the enemy within because they can be far more destructive than the one outside. The one outside is easy to spot, easy to see, but the one within is by nature covert, hidden, but appears the more friendly.

We must be a people that tests all things, test all words, all prophecies, test things that are purported to come from God – never take it for granted, never take it as read, but see if they fit in with

- Firstly the Bible – God will never contradict himself and so will never go against what the Bible says
- Never take one word that is purported to be from God, because he will confirm it. That is what we should be doing at Members' meetings and again there, no one person has a greater hotline to God than another, although yes, we may recognise a person as being a prophet, but they too should still be tested.
- The final test is whether and prophecy giving will come true, but it may take time. I heard this week of a prophecy that was given seven years ago and is just beginning to come about

But the intimidation did not stop when the wall was finished because sadly some of those within the walls were selling out to those outside. There was this web we have which centres around Tobiah. Tobiah is married to the daughter of Shecaniah who is mentioned in the list of builders and also Tobiah's son, Jehohanan has married the daughter of Meshullam who repaired the walls. At times people perhaps hedge their bets so to speak and so end up running with the hare and with the hounds.

But perhaps we should not be too hard on them because fear makes different people do different things. Things they would not normally do, but maybe this means we should pray for each other, for courage and strength to continue with God. Remember the prayer of Nehemiah

“...”Now strengthen my hands.” (Nehemiah 6:9 NIV)

May we be strengthened as we Build For The Future, as we build ourselves up spiritually which can be difficult when there is so much around us to distract us, to take us away, to stop us reading God’s Word, talking to God in prayer, coming to church to worship and fellowship with others.

May we be strengthened as we Build For The Future, as we build the Kingdom of God up by talking the message out into the community, to our work colleagues, to our neighbours, to our friends. Telling them about what we did on Sunday, about our relationship with God. Many pundits are talking about Christianity dying out in this country in this century, so let us allow God to **Now strengthen my hands**, so that we can begin to show the pundits they are wrong. The more we believe that the more we will be weak. As Nehemiah said

“They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, ”Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” ...” (Nehemiah 6:9 NIV)

If we believe all we read, then our hands will weaken through fear, but we need to keep on building his Kingdom.

May we be strengthened as we Build For The Future, as we build the church, the physical building. We do have some way to go, we are only on the beginning of the road, but just as those in the 1920s had the vision and drive for this building, then we too can have the drive and vision for what God wants now – his church fit for the twenty-first century.