

Title: The Christian Caring Profession – Nehemiah 1v1-11

Purpose: To observe and understand what Nehemiah cares about, how that works and also how that presents itself.

INTRODUCTION

General election (Thursday May 7th)

Well the good news is that you still have 66 days to make your mind up!

Q. I wonder if you have decided how you're going to vote on May the 7th?

Perhaps you're still **unsure**.

What you can be **sure** about is that topping the bill of what people in the UK **care about** will be things like:

- education
- immigration
- employment
- and yes – health – the NHS

It is possible of course that you no longer care enough, or think it worthwhile enough, to actually step out & vote.

Christina Odone

Thinking about the NHS for a moment: Christina Odone, a journalist, wrote an article for the **Daily Telegraph** entitled **"Nursing is no longer the caring profession"**.

Commenting on the experience of her 79 year old mother she said:

"... she found more care amid the cauliflowers and cash registers of John Lewis than in the NHS hospital she was admitted to six months ago. Her calls for water and a commode were ignored; so, too, were her attempts at conversation. Worse still, at one point she found herself lying unclothed on the bed while the two nurses who were sponging her giggled and spoke in Tagalog.

At least she was spared the nurses who wear red tabards emblazoned with the warning "Do Not Disturb".

Well we all hope that this is not the norm, because sooner or later we are probably all going to have to experience nursing care in a hospital or at home.

Now as you probably realise, I'm not interested in speaking about politics or the health service per se BUT what I want to suggest to you is that if you are this morning a Christian – (if you would tick that box on the NHS admission form which wants to know whether you consider yourself to be religious) – then you were enrolled from that moment into, what I will call, **"THE CHRISTIAN CARING PROFESSION"**.

Allow me to explain what I mean:

The letter of **1 John** in the NT is quite unique in that it provides us with a series of tests by which a believer can know that

he or she is genuine article, to know that they are, as believers in Jesus Christ bonafide.

One of the tests concerns **what we care about** – and it is comprises the 3 verses at:

1 John Chapter 2 from Verse 15-17 “**Do not love the world** or anything in the world. **If anyone loves the world**, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the **cravings** of sinful man, the **lust** of his eyes and the **boasting** of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. **The world and its desires pass away**, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

You might summarise this test as the CARING TEST.

As I said – every genuine Christian is a member of THE CHRISTIAN CARING PROFESSION – what this simply means is that: we care about, we love that which God cares about, that which God loves AND NOT about what Joe Public loves.

This morning – Nehemiah – a WORKED EXAMPLE

This morning, we are going to look at this man Nehemiah, from the 11 verses in this opening chapter that was read to us earlier on – and to use him as a WORKED EXAMPLE of what I have been talking about.

A question – to have in our minds

A question that I want us to have in our minds as we go through is:

Q. Assuming that you are a member of the Christian Caring Profession – how much do you care?

And as we go through the stirring events of this opening chapter of Nehemiah – we will see Nehemiah’s care emerge progressively – and I want to follow it in three easy stages – and every stage show another level of his care.

#1 then:

1. HE CARED ENOUGH TO FEEL SOMETHING

The background

I won’t assume that you know the story – so let me give you the 60 second summary to bring us all up to speed:

- this story is taking place around 444BC – the events in this chapter are in Susa (or ‘Shushan’ if you have the KJV) which is one of the main cities of the Persians who overthrew the Babylonians.
- the Jews are now a small remnant back in the land of Judea that had returned under Zerubbabel in 537BC and they have succeeded in rebuilding a smaller version of the temple, however the walls and the gates of Jerusalem are still in the same state as when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed them back in 587BC
- as we learn from Nehemiah and opening couple of verses things are DIRE with the Jews

Focus on Nehemiah – 3 notable things

Now, as I said, I want to focus on Nehemiah and to start with I want to point out three NOTABLE THINGS (and I’ll do that from the lesser to the greater):

- **THE FIRST THING** is that Nehemiah appears to be a man of INITIATIVE:

From Verse 2 we see a party of men arriving in **Susa** from **Jerusalem** (which is a 1,000 miles over to the West) and he is the one who takes **THE INITIATIVE** to talk with them and question them.

And you get the sense that he **probes them in some detail** to really know what is going on there.

Missionaries

If you've ever had missionaries returning from the field back to their supporting churches and you ask them about the work, they will often (first of all) give you a fairly polite answer. They will often spare you the details of many of their real challenges.

If you've ever sensed that and wondered why – **it is probably a case of self-preservation partly** – because they don't want to quickly bare their hearts and reveal the depths of their troubles, if those listening are only going to say: "Well I'm sure the Lord knows what you need – I'll pray for you".

- **SECONDLY** that Nehemiah comes across as *not* just a man of INITIATIVE but a man of INTEREST:

This band of travel weary news bearers would soon have recognised that in Nehemiah was a man who was ***not* out just to get the FIRST SCOOP in the GOSSIP MARKET**.

For Nehemiah his interest was, if you like, **A TRUE VESTED INTEREST**:

- from his own people
- about his own people.

- **THIRDLY (and this is really the most impacting thing)** is that Nehemiah shows himself to be a man of INTENSITY:

And I don't mean that in any bad way (sometimes people can be rather intense and socially unaware) that's not what I am talking about here.

The thing about Nehemiah here is that the news he gets from back home "utterly devastates" him.

God's people are in God's land – and yet all the while they are OPPRESSED and in great DISGRACE.

To give you an idea of how serious this was for a city – imagine that I came to your house and I removed your front door – COMPLETELY! – so that anyone at all from off the street could simply walk in and potentially carry off whatever they took a liking to.

It would be very dis-heartening to come down in the morning and find your TV had gone walkies in the night – very humiliating and disconcerting.

Coming back a moment to Nehemiah's INTENSITY:

Q. I wonder if you have ever wept over something that primarily had to do with God?

Q. Have you ever felt disturbed, or even vexed, by something relating to God's cause?

Now you might say – well I am temperamentally just not like Nehemiah. The only time I ever shed a tear is when someone dies – beyond that I’m not the weepy type.

But let me say that tears are not the only indicators that we care deeply about something – think of the times that you:

- get very happy about something, you’re over the moon about it
- or conversely when you are really very cross and angry or perhaps just irritated about something
- or when you are really down about something

All of these are sure and certain signs that you CARE DEEPLY about something or someone.

Q. What is in Nehemiah’s heart?

Q. What is it that he cares about, that he sheds tears over and feels devastated about?

Well put simply – **HE CARES ABOUT WHAT GOD CARES ABOUT.**

So what is that – well I think we could summarise the floor plan of the OT under the phrase:

“God’s **people**, in God’s **place** enjoying God’s **purposes**”

And Nehemiah can see very obviously:

- that God’s **people** are in DISGRACE
- that God’s **place** is still DEVASTATED
- & that God’s purposes are

Now let me say, at this point, that Nehemiah’s CARING could have stopped here at this point – afterall he had shed tears – he had shown God that he really did care about all that God cared about.

He cared enough to feel something

but also now #2:

2. HE CARED ENOUGH TO SAY SOMETHING

Post-exilic OT history

One thing you notice about the **OT history** is that **LAST does not all mean LEAST!**

It has to be said that the prayers of some of these POST-EXILE people are really priceless and work for us as incredible models of how to pray (especially if you find yourselves in a quite tricky position).

If you want to see the truth of that you don’t need to look any further than the prayers of people like **Daniel**, **Ezra** or (as we have here) **Nehemiah**.

Q. How long for?

Now Nehemiah, in Verses 5 to 11 **having been mourning**, goes on now to fasting & praying and it is quite instructive to wonder:

Q. Just how long this went on for?

Q. How long would you have the stamina to seek God for UNTIL you sensed that you had prevailed?

Well **Nehemiah Chapter 1** doesn't actually, itself, contain the answer – however, we only need to trespass on **Nehemiah Chapter 2 and the first Verse** to get our answer.

The time period is from the month Kislev to the month Nisan and that is a duration of **4 months**, somewhere **around 120 days** – that is essentially a **1/3 of a year**.

The prayer that we are given here, in **Verses 5-11**, is essentially the essence of what Nehemiah was praying across that whole time.

And what I want to do is to **turn the prayer in 3 directions extracting**, if you will, **the UPPERMOST KEY ASPECTS**:

- **THE FIRST ASPECT** is there in **Verses 5&6** – and it shows up in **the way Nehemiah addresses God – it tells us his OUTLOOK ON GOD**:
(Verse 5) “... O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands...”

And God is described here in 3 different but complementary ways:

a) the FIRST is – the “God of heaven” -> this is notable because its use in the Bible is almost exclusively used in the POST-EXILIC books – and this period is a different period because the people of God are either “STILL AWAY” from home in Israel OR if they have returned – they HAVE PREVIOUSLY “BEEN AWAY” and that experience has shown them that their God is *NOT* tied (like all the other gods of the nations)

- to a particular “locale”

- to a particular “land” (we should remember that gods in those days were seen as very territorial).

b) the SECOND TITLE is – the “great & awesome God” -> how you perceive God is going to make a big difference when it comes to how you pray (& perhaps whether you pray).

And this title very naturally links up with Nehemiah's belief in the fact that Yahweh – the LORD was the God over all the heavens. maybe Nehemiah looked back at his own life and looked with the eyes of faith and saw his great & awesome God at work (despite living as a stranger in a foreign land)

c) the THIRD TITLE speaks of God as the **“covenant keeping God”** -> now Nehemiah's prayer here recalls the 2nd commandment about knowing tremendous blessing when we avoid the enticements of idolatry.

Deuteronomy 7 verse 9 sums it up pretty well:

“Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; He is the Faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.”

Q. Now what does it mean to say that God is a “covenant keeping” God OR to say that God is a God of “covenant love”?

Well COVENANT is all about:

- a relationship that is BINDING and SECURE

- it is that UNSWERVING COMMITMENT where God declares that “I will be your God AND you will be my people.”

- It is that “covenant of love” which provides the most amazingly fertile “soil” into which our prayers may find wonderful reception.

OK – that's the START of the prayer

Q. What about the HEART of the prayer?

- **THE SECOND ASPECT** is there in **Verses 6&7** – If the first part of the prayer show Nehemiah’s **OUTLOOK ON GOD**, this middle section shows Nehemiah’s **OUTLOOK ON HIMSELF**.
And this is where the prayer turns to **CONFESSION**.
You see **Honesty, Sincerity, Integrity, Transparency** are completely vital and indispensable in prayer.

Psalm 139 (Verses 23-24) puts it like this: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

And Nehemiah does not consider the problem to be elsewhere -> “Oh, I thank you God that I am not like all those wicked people over there!!”.

See how he puts it there at the end of **Verse 6**: “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed.”

Before we can ever be part of “the solution” we usually have to first acknowledge that we too are part of “the problem”. Not only that we need to agree that our sin is serious:

IF WE: take seriously that we have an all-holy God

CAN WE: soft peddle & trivialise our own sinfulness

Verse 7 “We have acted very wickedly toward you...”

We then come to the end part of the prayer:

- **THE FINAL ASPECTS** and this is from **Verse 8 to the end**. Now although all the parts of the prayer are important, **the last part is probably the most vital**: Q. Why?
Well simply because it gives us **THE BASIS** upon which the petition proceeds.

Nehemiah wants God to intervene

he wants God to bring about a change in the welfare of the Jews (which otherwise is remarkably unlikely to come about)

Nehemiah is claiming a promise that God himself uttered many centuries ago:

READ **Verses 8&9** ***READ***

And now Nehemiah operates his faith in God

his faith in God’s own faithfulness to his own unchanging word:

READ **Verse 10&11** ***READ***

It gives great confidence to our prayers when we know that what we ask is very much in line & in step with who God is and what he himself has already promised in his word.

So Nehemiah – this man of INITIATIVE, INTEREST and INTENSITY – he SAT DOWN & WEPT
he also (for a spell of 120 days) – KNELT DOWN & PRAYED
a very **real**,

a very **thought out**,
a very **thorough** prayer.

Q. So where does Nehemiah get the power, the ability to pray the way he does?

Perhaps he is just a sort of Christian superman – the trouble with this thinking is shown us in **James 5** where we read about another superman called Elijah:

(James 5 verses 16-17) “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. **Elijah was a man just like us**. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.”

Q. So then, where does Nehemiah get his power in prayer?

Well simply because:

- not only does he “feel what God feels” – “care about what God cares about”
- he also “believes what God believes” – “believes simply & absolutely what God says”

Now Nehemiah could have stopped here – after all he’s worshipped, he’s wept, he’s confessed his sins and called on God – Q. What more could he do?

Finally, and only now, #3:

3. HE CARED ENOUGH TO DO SOMETHING

For some of us – it may be that we struggle with & temperamentally incline towards **being PASSIVE** – we are kind of “**armchair people**” – we love to take up position in the “sidelines” where we can happily watch 22 men running themselves ragged in the service of the Lord, while we cheer from a safe distance.

For others of us – we are the **world’s ACTIVISTS** – if we are not busy at something – then we are “**all-at-odds**” and “**ill-at-ease**”.

Nehemiah, although a man of great **PASSION** & great **ACTION** – did *not* make that his launching off point.

For him it was absolutely crucial to hear from God first and foremost – to know his “good, pleasing and perfect will”.

And THEN, and ONLY THEN, (like Isaiah before him), is he is able to say: **“Here I am, send me”** – he volunteers himself for the work.

A big step

It was no small thing for Nehemiah to take a step.

But you know that is all God asks for – ONE STEP AT A TIME.

He doesn’t ask that we know the **WHOLE JOURNEY AHEAD OF TIME** – No!

But Nehemiah does not value his cushy job above the call of God – in fact he comes to see that the **VERY REASON** that he has the job he has is so that he may fulfil the calling that God has for his life.

It was the same with Esther who was essentially a predecessor of Nehemiah a generation or two before – as Mordecai said to her (Esther 4 verse 14) “who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

We might assume that it would have been the hardest thing to give up one of the most sought after positions intimately connected to one of the most powerful rulers in the world – no less than Artaxerxes Longimanus King of all Persia – but actually for Nehemiah this was something simpler.

Q. How did he have the power to care like this? Well simply because he hears God’s call.

CONCLUSION

I want to come full circle and remind you of our question:

Q. Do you care?

If you are part of the Christian Caring Profession

(and every true Christian is enrolled when they come to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness)

then Q. Do you care?

- PERHAPS you care enough to FEEL SOMETHING
-> and your power for this comes because you love what God loves, you care about what God cares about
- PERHAPS you care enough to SAY SOMETHING
-> and your power for this comes because you believe what God believes, you stand upon what God says
- PERHAPS you care enough to DO SOMETHING
-> and your power for this comes because you:
 - not only love what God loves, believe what he says
 - bu because you listen to what he says & hear when he calls

So, let me ask you, if you are a disciple of Jesus Christ: Q. Do you care?

My prayer is that the Lord God Himself challenge every single one of us, with “no exceptions”:

for HIS GLORY

& for OUR GOOD

in Jesus Name – AMEN