

# 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2024

## The paper-version Service



**To Begin:** Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe,

light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.



The Good  
Shepherd  
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

**Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Song:**

O God, our Help in ages past,  
our Hope for years to come,  
our Shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal Home.

short as the watch that ends the  
night  
before the rising sun.

Under the shadow of Thy throne  
Thy saints have dwelt secure;  
sufficient is Thine arm alone,  
and our defence is sure.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream  
bears all its sons away;  
they fly forgotten, as a dream  
dies at the opening day.

Before the hills in order stood,  
or earth received its frame,  
from everlasting Thou art God,  
to endless years the same.

O God, our Help in ages past,  
our Hope for years to come,  
be Thou our Guard while life shall  
last,  
and our eternal Home!

A thousand ages in Thy sight  
are like an evening gone,

## **The Sermon by Rev Brian Pritchard**

### **Read Nehemiah 2:12-20 and Luke 4:14-21 – Rally the people**

The book of Nehemiah is about rebuilding the wall of a great city; but it is also about spiritual renewal, rebuilding a people's dependence on God.

Nehemiah, a Jew, was cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes, and wept over the state of the ruined walls and gates of Jerusalem and the sad condition of those who had returned from exile in Babylon. He brings his concerns in prayer before God (ch. 1), and asks the king to send him to rebuild the city.

Nehemiah doesn't rush in, in his own strength. He waits on the Lord. Waiting is a frequent theme in the Bible. The last verse of Psalm 27: 'wait for the Lord, be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord'. Remember after the Ascension the disciples are told to wait. Nehemiah rests after his gruelling journey – this reminds us physically exhausted people do not achieve as much as they'd like to. Then he assesses the task, under cover of darkness, seeing the rubble of the city, the ruined walls and gates that had lain in ruins for over 100 years, suggesting 'God has abandoned his chosen people'.

Nehemiah knows this is his God-given task, but also that the opposition was arising, so has to be careful. He doesn't act alone - he has a trusted team, co-operative colleagues. Having completed the survey, he enlists the larger team to get on with the job. He speaks to them both of physical rebuilding, and spiritual rebuilding (the desolation of Jerusalem is a spiritual disgrace, dishonouring to God). He shares his vision.

In verse 18 Nehemiah shared what we might call his testimony; it was a real encouragement to that community. He reminded his hearers – especially those who were ridiculing, the opposition - 'the God of heaven will give us success'. We must not be ashamed of telling our story, speaking of God's work in our lives, challenging negativity – and as we do so, encourage others.

Psalm 66: the Psalmist celebrates God's mighty acts "Come and see what God has done ... He turned the sea into dry land ..." a reference to the Exodus. In verse 18 Nehemiah did similarly. Telling our story, sharing the vision, is a necessary task for the church. Our gospel reading today, from Luke 4, has been called Jesus' manifesto – Jesus anointed by the Spirit to preach the good news, to heal – and more. Which is what he did.

Do you, do we, live out Jesus' manifesto and see His church built? What is your testimony? Where have you seen the hand of God, even in recent days? Where have you seen lives changed, by the power of the Gospel, the love of Christ?

Nehemiah recognised he was a leader, but under greater authority – he sought God’s direction. Leaders must lead. But Christian leaders are accountable to God. A leader with infinite compassion, Nehemiah heard of the people’s need (that the city was in ruins) then wept, mourned, fasted, prayed - then he led.

Nehemiah was a leader with vision, a grasp of what could be. The wall – 3km long and 3m wide was built in an amazing 52 days. Nehemiah didn’t do it all himself – did he even lay one stone on another? He empowered and inspired others, he delegated and built teams who “worked with all their heart”. Which is what good leaders do.

At the former brewery site in Alton piles of rubble had to be cleared before new building could start. In one commentary on this part of Nehemiah the writer makes a reference to some church activities which are habitually maintained largely because ‘it’s what we always do’ and the good people who work in them are too busy with the ‘doing’ to evaluate the purpose, motives and aims. The late David Watson wrote in 1976: “At least once a year, ruthless questions need to be asked in an attitude of prayer and submission to God about the whole pattern of our services, our meetings and organizations and buildings.” In essence, David Watson challenges us to assess their relevance – today. I wasn’t popular with some in the church where I was Vicar when I posed David Watson’s questions. I knew there had to be changes if the church was to grow. ‘Rubble’ had to be cleared before we could lay firm foundations. It led to me asking another difficult question: by your clinging onto a role, are you denying another the opportunity to use their gifting? Could someone do it better than you? And is there something that would better suit your gifts, your anointing? What rubble, in our personal life, in our corporate life, needs to be cleared?

Sharing the vision, our story, is a necessary task for the church. Nehemiah shared his vision of rebuilt walls, an end to disgrace. Do you have a vision of what God is calling you to do, to be, either in the immediate future or perhaps at some future point in your life? Do we have a vision for where God is calling his church, here in Four Marks? I found this quote: “A vision without a task is a dream. A task without a vision is drudgery. But the two together are the hope of the world.”

We must be confident that, if God calls us to do something, He will give us the people, the resources, to do it. God doesn’t call the equipped – he equips those whom he calls. Conversely, if we don’t have the people, the resources, there is an implication that we shouldn’t be doing something, however desirable or traditional it may be. The hard work to rebuild the walls of

Jerusalem was a call to spiritual commitment, physical exertion, and material sacrifice. The people couldn't be complacent or despondent when they saw the rubble of the walls. As a holy people, under Nehemiah's leadership, they gave of their best, in every sense, to the Lord – they rejected the opposition of the enemy, and with wholehearted dedication to the Lord, they began this good work. Which is an example to us all. Let US work together!

The chapter ends with another attack by Nehemiah's opponents - opposition, mocking, ridicule. Note how Nehemiah responds: not by answering their lies, but by exalting God. He ignores the taunts and trusts in the God of heaven to give success.

*The Third Sunday of Epithany:* Almighty God, whose Son revealed in signs and miracles the wonder of your saving presence: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever .Amen.

*The Lord's Prayer:* Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

**Blessing** to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

**The Notices:** We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat: Feb 21<sup>st</sup> at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: Feb 21<sup>st</sup> at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: Jan 24<sup>th</sup> and Feb 28<sup>th</sup> at 10.30am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: TBA.
- Four Marks & Medstead Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday.
- COGS Tots and Tinytots are on Mondays. Messy Church: Second Sundays.