

Convictions and Priorities

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[0 : 00] The question for us is, where do we belong?

If we are members of the city, and the city gives us wealth and satisfies all our lusts and appetites, should we ask for anything more?

St. John's Shaughnessy Church The Reverend Harry Robinson delivered his message from the book of Nehemiah, the 7th chapter, verses 1 to 7 and verses 66 to 73.

The title of the message is, Convictions and Priorities. We, as a people, are experiencing in our world a crisis, an almost universal crisis of leadership.

Trumpets are blowing with the most uncertain sound. Like Elijah on Mount Carmel, he found the people in a total state of indecision and said to them, How long will you waver between two opinions?

[1 : 54] If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him. And that's really the picture that Nehemiah 7 puts before us.

Are we absorbed into the transient empire of Persia? Are we to be part of the eternal kingdom of God?

Where do you belong? Now, we've had an election in British Columbia with the expectation that those who we voted in will be better than those who were voted out.

We have a bus strike, the logic of which is completely beyond me, and the implications for the city are difficult.

I read of a nurses' strike this week and a vote to continue that strike, which was passed with a majority of 90%. My experience of 90% votes are that they're not very democratic, but I wonder what lies behind it.

[3 : 19] When the province gives a huge majority to one party, you see that they're voting not positively but negatively. When the British election wipes out the Conservative Party almost, you ask what is happening.

When Nelson Mandela is refused an honor by Canada because of one man's vote, is that man a John the Baptist or is he a scoundrel?

In the almost fanciful state of Nepal, the royal family are slaughtered by the heir apparent.

There's a lot of confusion in our world, and all those articles are thrown at us through the media, thrown in the waste paper basket the next day, and nobody ever tells us what it means.

We're badly in need of some kind of apostolic authority and some kind of clear political voice.

[4 : 35] our country has committed itself to a kind of scientific, secular, omniscient state built on the UN Charter and the Charter of Human Rights and committed and subject to no other power than our own.

And where that's going to lead? Nobody knows. We've never been in that situation before. Well, now look at Nehemiah's situation.

He was among a people who were exiled to Babylon, and he was perhaps in the third generation of those who had been exiled.

The long list of names in Nehemiah 7 is significant because, as I suspect, there's probably very few of you know the proper name of your great-grandfather.

It would be interesting to ask, but I won't. But they had a sense of continuity, which we don't have.

What had happened was, in chapter 7, the walls had been quite miraculously built in 52 days.

[6 : 22] The enemies were unable to break into the city, as traditionally they had always done very easily. The temple in the center of the city had been rebuilt.

The guards were set along the walls on the basis that the gates were not to be opened until the sun was well up into the sky and to be closed while it was still there because of the fear of the

adversaries of the city.

Most of the homes were in ruins and had to be rebuilt. And the whole province of Judah had to be repopulated because you don't have a city which is walls and buildings and transportation systems. You have a city that's made up almost entirely of people. And this was Nehemiah's job, to re-people the city and to re-people the towns and villages that surrounded it.

Now, it's very interesting because historically, this is, in a sense, some commentators said, this is the moment when Judaism was really established.

[7 : 51] They had been in Egypt as captives. They had had the promised land for a short time relatively. And then they were sent again into captivity in Babylon.

And there had grown up in Babylon, which is where this scene begins, there had grown up in Babylon a Jewish community that retained its identity within the capital city of the Babylonian Empire.

And it was they who were the thrust behind building Jerusalem again. It's, somebody has said that, that, written a book, John, John, I know his name, Dr. John, and he's speaking at Essentials, and his, this is my senior moment, it's gone, and he's written this book called, Why are there no Hittites in New York?

Because the Hittites were a great and powerful nation once, but now they're totally obscured in history. While this small company of Jews, that established itself in Babylon, that established itself in Sushan, that has established itself in Vancouver, if you don't believe me, go to 41st and Oak. And there you'll see it, very expensive kosher restaurant, which was made famous by a member of this parish who went there and said, could I have a ham sandwich?

[9 : 40] But that's happened. It's happened in Toronto and Montreal and New York.

It happens all the time. This community of people get together, and they retain their identity because they retain the scriptures, they retain the law of Moses, they retain ethnic purity, they are careful to observe the Sabbath, they retain the practice of circumcision, they retain their language, they avoid mixed marriages, they keep the sacrificial worship of the temple going.

They're not unlike the French community in Canada, you know, which has this tenacious way that it's holding on to its ethnic origins in the face of being a small part of a huge continent that could easily overwhelm them.

But the Jews learned how to do this first, and they did it. Ezra warned them what would happen if they failed.

And some of them were even persuaded to disband marriages, and they were persuaded to reinstate circumcision, the Sabbath, the rituals of the temple, the keeping of the city.

[11 : 18] They did all these things. Well, onto this scene then comes Nehemiah with the power of this Jewish community behind him in the capital cities of the Persian Empire because in three generations, then as now, they had accumulated great wealth and great prominence and great power, but they were concerned about Jerusalem.

So, Nehemiah went to Jerusalem, became the governor. Now, he was a very powerful man in the Persian Empire.

Could have been the prime minister, the cupbearer to the king, Artaxerxes. And the emperor had an empire which stretched from India to Egypt.

And in this empire, all religions were treated with respect and patronized by the emperor so that in this sense, he could use the religions for his own purpose.

Nehemiah belonged to one of those religious communities, this community of exiles. And his brother had come to him and said of Jerusalem and Judah, we are in great trouble and disgrace.

[12 : 59] The walls of the city are broken down, its gates burned with fire, and Nehemiah took days to mourn and fast and pray until God put into his heart what he wanted him to do.

Nehemiah went to the king, was commissioned by the king, given military support, given wealth and authority to rebuild the walls, to rebuild the gates, to reestablish the people.

through whom the city would be reestablished. He was in a place of very high standing in the Persian Empire with all this access to wealth.

He had an established reputation, both among his own people and beyond that, in the empire. He was an aristocrat, a member of the royal court.

All these things belonged to him. But, the thing that concerned Nehemiah was this city, this city which was in great trouble and disgrace at the ends of the empire with the walls broken, the gates

burned.

[14 : 27] And he was brokenhearted because of that. So, I want you to see the dual citizenship of this man. Great wealth and prominence and prestige in the Persian Empire, but a heart that belonged to Jerusalem.

And that's always the problem of the people of God. They were in danger of losing their Jewish identity.

And yet, they retained it and they gained standing in the power structures of the Persian Empire. So that the question for us is, where do we belong? If we are members of the city, citizens of the city, and the city gives us wealth and power and prestige and influence and satisfies all our lusts and appetites, should we ask for anything more?

It can provide all those things. But this man, after two generations had passed, had in his heart a deep longing for the city whose walls were collapsed, its gates burned, its people scattered, and only a degenerate form of religious ritual being observed in a temple which was a shack compared to the remembrance of the temple of Solomon, which had once stood in its place.

[16 : 21] there's the contrast, isn't it? Why would he choose Jerusalem? Well, the reason he chose Jerusalem was because deep within his heart there was a longing for the place where God dwelt, for the place where God was worshipped, that the central activity of the city was the praise and worship of God, that God would in fact inhabit the praises of his people, that the praise and worship of God as the daily activity which was what made the city work with the Levites and the singers and the temple guards and the priests going through their ritual day by day in the city.

This was where God had chosen to dwell and this is where Nehemiah, this is what was on his heart. So, here he had these sort of two positions.

One of prominence, wealth, and standing in the Persian city and one of sharing the disgrace and discouragement and downheartedness.

of Jerusalem. And it's not hard to tell from this story where his heart was, where he belonged. And of course, you're in the same position.

Why should wealthy, middle class, upper middle class people with a yacht in the harbor, membership in the best clubs, standing in the aristocratic society of the city, membership in the reputable firms and corporations, be interested in a city that was left three generations ago and continued to be marked by trouble and disgrace?

[18 : 26] Why would they? Because at the heart of what it means to be a human being is the longing for God. and the place that you recognize your true citizenship is not in the alien city where you are in exile.

It is in the city of God where you come home. And that's the problem. That was the problem last weekend in the synod when we debated the question of same-sex unions.

the city is insisting that we hold these values and Jerusalem says no. That's not where God's blessing is.

And that tension is very apparent in the church and it's very apparent for all of us. I mean, as I said, you don't know your great grandfather's name I speak.

You don't know who you are except as a member of the generation to which you belong. You don't know where you've come from. We don't know where we've come from.

[19 : 43] We don't know where we're going to. But there is given to us the awareness that Jerusalem is the city of God and citizenship in that city is what makes sense to us.

And that's what Nehemiah knew. And that's what Nehemiah did. Building the walls, establishing the community, rebuilding the praise and worship of the community, putting that at the center of the community.

Nehemiah did all those things. And that's what we're called to do. Not to be deceived by the transient kingdom.

Persia, from India to Egypt, before it Babylon, before it the Medes, before it the Chaldeans, after it Alexander the Great, after him the Roman Empire, and all these transient empires which flourish and fade.

then there's a community which has to pray every day because this kingdom cannot last.

[21 : 07] Lord, may your kingdom come. And finding in that coming kingdom, imminently coming kingdom, finding your citizenship and finding where, in fact, you belong.

That there in Jerusalem, as opposed to the cities of Persia, you are no longer foreigners nor aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone.

in that city you are like living stones, Peter said, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So that from looking at Nehemiah chapter 7, my prayer for you is that God might put it into your heart to do and to understand what Nehemiah did and what he understood.

That he distinguished between the transient kingdoms of history and the abiding kingdom, which is marked by the presence and praise of the eternal God, who confronts us in the person of Jesus Christ.

[22 : 43] That's what your life is about. hope you don't miss it. One hymn writer has written, in terms of this world, my richest gain, I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride.

the great moment which comes when you give up pride and take up praise. Amen.

Amen. This digital audio sermon along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnshaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohnshaughnessy.org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this message has helped you, and that you will share it with others. Thank you.