

REFORMED CHURCH CLANWILLIAM : SUNDAY 21 JULY 2013 MORNING SERVICE

Sing before: Psalm 147:2

Let us commence this meeting with God by declaring openly to one another and to God:

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Beloved grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Psalm of praise: Psalm 65:2

Confession of faith: Nicene

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was Incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe one holy universal and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

After the reading of the Law we confess our guilt and pray for forgiveness and a new life before God with Psalm

Law

Psalm: 31:2

Prayer:

- **Doxology**
- **Worship**
- **Confession of sins**
- **Forgiveness**
- **Gratitude**
- **Prayer for the need of the congregation of the church, the authorities and the sinful world and appeal to God's promises**
- **General prayer**
- **Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit for the sake of the ministry of the Word.**

Amen

Psalm 146:6

Scripture reading: Nehemiah 5**Scripture text:** Nehemiah 5:17

And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

(Nehemiah 5:17)

For the benefit of people or matters part of our own in Jesus Christ, the Lord often asks us to offer up more than is normally expected from us.

1. **Saving from misery.**
2. **Own offer ability.**

1. **Saving from misery**

In the first part the people decided upon all sorts of social measures to elevate the poor from the misery they landed in. The second part deals with Nehemiah' own unselfishness and offer ability towards his people.

Let us first consider the social backdrop:

- The Jews had to work non-stop for 52 days on the city wall – resulting that the people could not really attend to their own matters.
- The rich could still handle the pressure of such circumstances but the poor were landed deeper in their misery by it.

Together with that there were the taxes, extremely difficult to cope with, laid for a long time onto the people.

- This resulted in the total financial impoverishing of certain parts of the people.
- A great divide developed between the rich at the top of the ladder and the poor at the bottom.

The building activities on the other hand again brought about a feeling of unity amongst the people and the divide between the two main groups (rich and poor) diminished.

- Everybody again felt themselves part of the same nation.
- It also caused the poor to regain their self-respect.

This is how it came about that in verse 1 it is written that the poor men and their wives together laid a complaint about the flagrant disregard of their rights in their poverty and the position they had to take up next to the rich.

These were very serious complaints.

- It mainly dealt with exploitation that became so bad that the poor had to pawn their children to the rich for just enough wheat to stay alive.
- This simply meant that the children had to do slave labour in order of paying the debts their parents incurred to keep them alive.

This slave labour would be contrary to Leviticus 26:39 (also compare 2 Kings 4:1)

- This section decrees inter alia that Jews enslaved due to debt must be freed after a period of seven years.
- The leaders in the times of Nehemiah completely disregarded the laws laid down by the Lord for them.
- In this way utter injustice was done to the poor.

From verse 3 we deduct that possibly there also was a great drought because the farmers were also in trouble due to failed crops.

- They did not need to pawn their children but had to pawn their possessions instead – their lands and vineyards.
- They also could not pay back and lost their possessions.

Some of the others, who returned and landed into financial difficulties, in order to pay the king's heavy taxes, pawned their land to their fellow citizens.

- They also ended up poor and without any possessions.

The standard agreement in those days was that interest payable will at least be a third of the borrowed amount per year.

- Should repayment be completed within one year the borrower had to pay at least double the amount to the lender.
- This then was also the basis of the complaint: The Lord clearly stipulated that the Israelites were not allowed to take exorbitant profit from their fellow countrymen. Compare Exodus 22; 24; Leviticus 25:36; Deuteronomy 23:19; Psalm 15:5; Ezekiel 18:8.

The complaints were bitter. Especially because the lenders enriched themselves by trampling down their fellow citizens.

- The poor complained that they must helplessly and belittled stand by and see how their children became slaves to the rich and how the rich dishonored their daughters as concubines.

- This process left them entirely without any possessions.

This meeting took place at the stage when Nehemiah encouraged the people into rebuilding the city wall that has to protect them against their enemies.

- The meaning thereof must not be missed because it in fact opens the eyes of Nehemiah to the fact that internal decay, against which no city wall will help, is taking place amongst the people.
- The internal decay is also worse in its decay than the attacks by the enemies from outside.

It seems that two meetings were called.

- The first was with the leaders of the people, but their unwillingness did nothing towards solving the problem.
- Right from the start Nehemiah had the problem that the leaders of the people did not, as he put it, put their shoulders to the work of their Lord. (Compare 3:5)

Then he called a meeting of the people against them. And at this meeting of the people Nehemiah and the people accused the leaders of being, contrary to the law of the Lord, usurers, damaging the children of the Lord.

Note the difference between “we” and “you”

- Nehemiah and his group were the “we” who harnessed all their powers in freeing the Jews from the Babylonian exile.
- The “you” are the rich Jews in Jerusalem and vicinity enslaving the people again by means of monetary malpractice, this time only under new ownership. Firstly it was the Babylonians and now it is the rich fellow-Jews.

Eventually everything is about personal enrichment.

- On this the rich had no answer.
- That must be considered as an admission of guilt.

Nehemiah draws the attention of the rich to the fact that the enemies of the Lord welcome their methods of plowing away a large portion of the children of God.

- The heathens deride the children of the Lord because they humble, ill-treat and destroy each other.
- This only serves to simplify the task of the heathens should they also want to do so.

Nehemiah does not act as a judge, wanting to punish them.

- All that he asks from them is their obedience to the Lord.
- Nehemiah makes himself as part of the solution: He was also a moneylender, and he, the same as the rich, will absolve the debts of the poor.
- All of them must write off the outstanding debt of their fellow believers.

Everybody followed the good example of Nehemiah. The pawned ground, possessions and children were returned the same day.

Nehemiah immediately called in the priests to, by an oath, ratify this agreement.

- This leader knew his people very well – he knew that during the days of Zedekiah they also freed slaves, but that the people immediately called back the people to be slaves. (Compare Jeremiah 34:8 – 11).
- Therefore he now had them take an oath that they would keep to their word.

Then Nehemiah did a symbolic deed.

- The Shemidaites folded their clothes in a specific way and carried their money there.
- Nehemiah shook out his clothes and said that anybody breaking this oath will be shaken out in the same way.
- All the people answered this act by a clear confirmation: Amen.

2. Own offer ability

Verses 14 –19 give proof of Nehemiah’s own love and willingness to offer up to his people.

Shortly after the departure of Nehemiah from Susan Artaxerxes named him as city keeper of the province of Judah.

- He served for 12 years from 445 to 433 b.C. in this post
- According to his office he had the right to “governor’s bread”.
 - This is a kind of tax the citizens had to pay to the governor.
 - This tax was intended to supply in the needs of the governor’s needs.

Nehemiah’s predecessors made wide use of this tax because the people had so see to their livelihoods and also pay an additional amount of 40 pieces of silver.

- It is very difficult to determine in our money how much that would have been today - especially as the values of things changed a lot in time.
- Forty pieces of silver is ten pieces more that what the average price of a piece of land was. With the thirty pieces of silver cast into the temple by Judas the piece of land was bought from the potter.

As if that was not enough the people of the previous government administration were very demanding because they extorted the people even further.

This, Nehemiah did not do.

- His motivation did not rest upon the political or judiciary level like the other governors.
- Out of free will Nehemiah negated for all twelve years of his office this right.
- His motivation was his faith. He feared the Lord’s punishment should you do things wrongly – keep in mind that the exile was still very fresh in his memory!

This judgement points towards his unity and association with the Lord.

- His conscience did not allow him to enrich himself to the detriment of the children of the Lord.
- Paul had the same viewpoint about the New Testamental congregation of Philippi. (Philippians 4:14)

Although the income of Nehemiah was very diminished by his negation of this specific right he still offered up a lot towards the well being of his people.

- We must keep in mind that the people were the church of those times!
- As an example he contributed richly to the costs of rebuilding the wall.
- He also did not buy ground or a piece of land – which was in those times the most common way of money investment.

Therewith he also fed 150 people from his own table. And he also supplied food to people of the surrounding nation.

- It is unknown how these people came to Nehemiah.
- Possibly it was of the people he had contracts with for the supply of certain goods needed for the repairs to the wall.

Notwithstanding this all Nehemiah asked nothing from the people.

- He made this sacrifice because he realized that his people already bore a heavy burden from the Persian authorities.
- They also had to spend a lot for the rebuilding of the city wall and the temple.
- This is also why he prays for the Lord to bless him for all these glorious offerings he is making towards the children of the Lord.

Nehemiah thus practiced his governmental status in the same style as Jesus Christ.

- The Lord Jesus also fed great multitudes.
- Like Nehemiah, He also saved His people from shame and repaired their honour.

The Lord Jesus only had to do it under completely different circumstances than Nehemiah.

- Nehemiah could call on the leaders of the people about their indiscretion and extortion whereby the rest of the people were impoverished and humiliated.
- He could also call on the people for help in a meeting to bring the matter to a close and afterwards use the priests to seal this matter.

With Jesus He had to answer Himself for the entire population and for the sins of their leaders.

- Indeed it was also the people who turned against Jesus and shouted that His blood must come onto them and their children.
- Whilst these people still stood around the cross, the Lord Jesus died.
- He gave all that He had – His life and His body and blood onto the death.

Then He conquered death.

- Thereby He overcame the poverty working sin insides of us and freed us from it.
- Like Nehemiah had the possessions the people lost returned, the Lord Jesus Himself had the life we lost and the image of the Lord, which we carry and marred, returned to us.

His work of salvation over us was re-creative of nature. By His death we were repaired in the richness of the grave of God so that we may approach His Kingdom and live there eternally.

Should we now read the cross death of the Lord Jesus together with the personal offer ability of Nehemiah to again repair the church people of the Lord and also repair the city and temple of the Lord it should let us reflect upon our own offer ability towards our fellow people and towards the church of the Lord.

Amen.

Closing prayer.

Closing Psalm: Psalm 107:1

The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make his face shine on you, the Lord turn His countenance to you and give peace.

Amen

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