

Celebrating a Job well done

Nehemiah 12:27-43

Some things are just worth celebrating, aren't they? The people of Nehemiah's time had really pulled together and worked hard to rebuild the city walls, finishing the construction phase of the project in just 52 days. And with the walls completed, not only would the residents of the city enjoy an increased sense of security – all the pilgrims who would travel to Jerusalem three times a year would feel a lot safer too. This was a triumph for all of God's people, so a big celebration was certainly in order.

So, if you had to plan such an occasion, what sorts of things would you include? Think, for example about a ribbon cutting to mark a grand opening, like the one we had for the new walking track at the Fairgrounds or the one at the Royalty Lounge and Bistro last week. The ribbon is cut, and then you take a good look at the finished product, right? You admire the facilities and you thank the donors or congratulate the owner – and if you get to enjoy some great food at the Bistro, you can go work it off at the new track!

And the same kind of comprehensive inspection seems to be at least part of what the people did in today's passage. They assembled two great choirs, but they didn't just walk around the walls – no, they climbed up on top of them! And of course we can easily imagine the rest of the people below, looking up and marveling at how something so sturdy could possibly have been built in such a short span of time.

But that's where things get weird, right? For we would expect some congratulations to be in order on such an occasion. Nehemiah should of course have given a rousing speech, thanking and praising the people for their hard work. And given the fact that he was a governor appointed by the Persian King, we might have expected him to lead the people in three cheers for Artaxerxes, who had allowed the project to go forward and had provided such generous financial support for it. But there's not any speechmaking of any kind in the whole passage.

And wouldn't you think that a committee should have gotten together to make some sort of presentation to Nehemiah? He's the one who had gotten the ball rolling when he took the risky step of asking the Persian King for help. And Nehemiah was the one who had overseen the whole project from beginning to end. He's the one who kept encouraging the people in the face of all that opposition, organizing their defensive efforts and making sure the work on the walls went steadily on. Surely he deserved some recognition for his tremendous contributions, the ancient equivalent of a gold watch or at least a nice plaque.

But just as there were no congratulatory speeches, there was no adulation for the leaders who had made it all possible. Even though verse 31 indicates that Nehemiah planned and organized the entire ceremony, he makes it quite clear in verse 38 that he took the last place in the second choir. Unlike our modern US Senators who love to preen before the TV cameras, Nehemiah was only too happy to let others have the limelight.

Okay, so if there weren't any speeches given or awards handed out, how did the people celebrate a job well done? What sorts of things did they think were appropriate for such a momentous

occasion? And what can we learn from their celebration that can help us get our own priorities in the right order?

Well, what was the first thing on their list? Music! But this wasn't the spur-of-the-moment "let's take hymn requests" sort of thing. No, verse 27 tells us that they called for the Levites to participate in the celebration because, among their other duties, they were the trained musicians of the day. You see, the people didn't just want any old singing – they wanted the cymbals and the stringed instruments and the harps – the whole works. And verse 36 points out that they used all the same sorts of instruments David had used some 600 years before.

And that, in turn, might give us a clue as to the songs they selected – they were probably some of the psalms that David and his servants had written way back then. Now, we aren't sure which ones they selected for the occasion, but Psalm 48, which we read responsively, would certainly have been appropriate, wouldn't it? "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion," the mountain on which Jerusalem was built. The Psalm goes on: "Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks." Isn't that exactly what the people were doing on that great occasion, admiring the walls that had been rebuilt?

But the end of the Psalm helps us understand why they were more interested in singing Psalms than in making speeches on this occasion: "For this God is our God forever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death." In other words, the focus of the people during the whole ceremony was the same as that of the Psalmist – they weren't congratulating themselves, or even heaping accolades on their human leaders. No, they wanted to give all the glory to God for this job well done. No matter how much they themselves might have been involved in the building project, they wanted to make sure that God got all the credit for the results.

And that laser-like focus on God and His glory helps to explain all the different parts of this ceremony, doesn't it? For they didn't just eschew speeches in praise of men in favor of songs of praise to God. No, this God-focused approach also explains that curious comment in verse 30, which says that, in preparation for the celebration, the priests and the Levites purified themselves, the people, the gates, and the wall. What was that all about? And how could that be part of a celebration?

Well, if you look back in Exodus 19, when they were getting ready to receive the Law of Moses, the people had purified themselves by washing their clothes and avoiding sexual activity. In Leviticus 16, the high priest purified the tabernacle once a year by sprinkling it with the blood of a sacrifice. In Numbers 8, the tribe of Levi was purified by having water sprinkled on them and by shaving off their hair.

Now, we're not exactly sure what was called for on this occasion. But all of these symbolic actions have one thing in common – they emphasize that, in our natural state, none of us are worthy to enter the presence of the Lord or to serve Him. All of us need to be cleansed, even the people of Nehemiah's time who had just finished performing an amazing act of service to God.

And that points to an important corrective whenever we are celebrating a job well done. For no matter what service we may do for God, no matter how long we may have been walking with Christ, we never outgrow the need for repentance. We never get past the need to search our souls and turn away from anything in our lives that is separating us from God, the need to turn away from anything that we

have come to consider as more important than God. The fact that the people who had just finished building the wall around Jerusalem needed to be purified reminds us that there's nothing any of us ordinary Christians could possibly do to earn our way into God's good graces. No, we all remain sinners in need of a Savior.

And one of the other components of this ancient celebration serves to reinforce the same idea – verse 43 tells us that they offered great sacrifices. Now again, we don't know exactly what sorts of animals they offered up, but it doesn't really matter. For all those slain bulls or rams or lambs pointed in one way or another to the same truth – without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin. Because all sin is treason against God, all sin deserves the death penalty. We're all living on death row, so how well we behave, or how clean we keep our cells or jumpsuits just doesn't matter.

But if there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, if we need instead to have a sacrifice made on our behalf, the good news is that it has already been offered. For as Jesus died on the cross, He made a perfect, complete atonement for all the sins of all His people throughout space and time. Thus, He not only perfectly kept the Law of Moses for all of us by living a sinless life. He also paid the penalty the Law prescribed for all our sins by His death. Jesus was in this way the fulfillment of all the purification rituals the people of Nehemiah's day performed, as well as all the animal sacrifices they offered as part of their great celebration. In short, by doing these things, they were in their own way celebrating Jesus, just as we do every Sunday morning.

So, I suppose it's no wonder that the hallmark, the principal focus of their celebration was not self-congratulation but instead thanksgiving. That's why Nehemiah organized those two choirs, not to praise the people for their hard work, but to give thanks to God. In fact, they went so far as to use the word "thanksgiving" to describe not just what the choirs did, but who they were.

And this is one time the King James Version really shines, for it uses italics to indicate which words have been supplied by the translators to make the meaning of the Hebrew more plain. So if you take out the italicized words in verse 31, we find that Nehemiah appointed not two choirs, but "two great thanksgivings," one that went to the right on top of the wall. The same language, "the other thanksgiving," is used in verse 38 to describe the group that went to the left. So it was not only the songs the choir sang but the members of the choirs themselves that embodied the thanks that the people were offering to God.

And that naturally leads to the last component of this great God-centered celebration. For the people not only purified themselves, turning away from their sin. They not only offered sacrifices, reminding one another of their need for a Savior. They not only gave thanks to God for the great mercies He had shown to them. Because of all these things, verse 43 says that the people rejoiced. And yes, that means everyone – the men, the women and the children too.

And that was only fitting. After all, back in chapter 8, we saw that all the people, men, women, along with the children old enough to understand God's Word, had gathered in Jerusalem to hear Ezra the scribe read the Law of Moses to them. At that time, even after they themselves had helped to rebuild the wall, they had been convicted of their sin. As they heard God's expectations of them, they were moved to tears at the thought that they had let God down by the things they had thought, said, and done as well as the things they had left undone.

But now, as they looked at the way God had blessed them in spite of their sins, as they remembered how God had allowed them to return to the Promised Land, to rebuild their Temple, and even to live in the safety of the city walls, as they acted out their repentance, their rejection of sin through the purification rituals, as they experienced the assurance of their salvation through the sacrificial system that pointed to Christ, what could they do but express their thanksgiving in pure, unadulterated joy? No, it's no wonder that their shouts and songs of triumph could be heard afar off.

Well, how about us? If the shadows and prophecies of Christ could move these ancient people to give thanks and rejoice with such fervor, how much more should we follow their example? For we know the great price God has paid for us – not the blood of bulls and goats but the precious blood of His own Son. And because of Christ's resurrection from the grave, we know that God is protecting us not just with walls of wood and stone from marauding thieves. No, as Jesus walked out of that tomb on the third day, Jesus has gained the victory over our worst enemies – over sin and even over death. In the light of the cross and the empty tomb, we can be assured of God's love, we can be confident in His power to save. So surely we can join our voices with these two choirs on the Jerusalem walls, we can become part of the great thanksgiving, along with all the saints and angels throughout all the ages, in singing His praise.