

Bishop Jo's sermon at her Installation in Guildford Cathedral - 25th Sept 2016

Date: 26 September 2016



Nehemiah 2; John 8:31-38

The Bishop of Dorking, Guildford Cathedral.

"You've landed yourselves with a bishop who loves the Old Testament and that is the where I want to begin today.

The Old Testament reading (Nehemiah 2; John 8:31-38) is about a call to a new leader for a new time. The story of Nehemiah marks a watershed moment for the people of Israel: The Point of No Return.

It's 600 years before Christ. The people of Israel, God's holy people, had been doing so well: it all looked so good. Settled and strong, they were well-organised internally, with wealth and establishment, politics and faith wholly intertwined. And a capital city to die for, with prestige and power that had brought them to play on a wider international stage. Trouble is that many did die in Jerusalem when it was invaded and decimated by the unrestrained ambitions of a foreign despot. Those who survived either migrated to the four winds or were carted off to Babylon as slave labour.

Israel finds itself in what became known as the exile. A time of shame and loss – there was devastation and depression, physically and spiritually. Lost their land and lost their identity. At the point of no return. Perhaps they'd lost God too? Worse still, were they lost by God - had God abandoned them? What follows was a hitting*bottom moment, a stripping down, much lament: looking at God face to face and looking in the mirror, naming the hardest questions. All written up in Jeremiah and Lamentations. It was The Point of No Return.

It turns out God was there. Indeed like dry and dusty brown landscape of the Namib desert which suddenly turns to glorious technicolour when the heavens send rain once every few

years, God's work of transformation comes to bloom in these unpromising circumstances. Which brings us back to Nehemiah, with Israel in the desert seeking out God's transformation. Brought face to face with their predicament at *The Point of No Return*.

Nehemiah is one of those Israelites who has pulled himself up by his bootstraps in Babylon. He's worked his way from the labour camp to principal private secretary in the service of the Persian king – thankfully a far more amenable successor to Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian. No formal power but clearly knows how to win friends and influence in the lengthy corridors of the empire. He dares to voice a longing to rebuild Jerusalem, and with great diplomacy and a good dollop of charm, finds himself on his way back to Jerusalem with their sponsorship and support. No need for the lottery. Such nerve, such vision!

Clearly there were many who thought him mad. What to do with a glorious past that is *past*? Two reactions of denial – the negative sort that says it was never that great; or the false positivism that pretends the glory days are not over. Both are forms of depression – ignoring God's faithfulness in the past, precluding God's faithfulness in the future. Problem is, both deny God's power to transform in the present. What if God has indeed brought us here, and for such a time as this. What can we learn? How might we change? What could we do, and do different?

In Babylon, Israel had reached the point of no return. I wonder whether the same is true of us today. We've not been carted a thousand miles east to Babylon, but the church today is looking in the mirror, facing some hard questions. Where is our power, our status, our identity? Where is our hold on the nation's imagination? Some glorious buildings from the past, but many in need of significant repair. Can you picture the British museum in a thousand years' time: where medieval and renaissance sections of the second millennial wing have whole floors illustrating the dynamic role of the church in society; reducing to a single room by the end of the C20, then diminishing to rarified glimpses – like the panda bear if we're lucky and the dodo if we're not. Are we going to deny? Harp back? Is the church at The Point of No Return?

(Why are you installing a new bishop? To help close things down? Wouldn't it make more sense to cut our losses, and our budgets, and go the way of the post office?)

Nehemiah is called to leadership at just this moment: *The Point of No Return*. What we can we learn from him?

1. **Real about the Mess** - Nehemiah is unsentimental about what he's facing. He's not nostalgic about the past and he's not daunted by the present. Puts on his hard hat and toe-capped boots and goes out there to case the wreckage. No hiding from it. He's real about the dangers - he goes out in the dark, no high-vis vest for him – recognising there'll be opposition. Then he speaks of disgrace, a strong word. Acknowledging mistakes, sense of shame. This is indeed the point of no return.
2. **Real about God** - But he also speaks of God – and speaks to God. He speaks of disgrace yet he is so clearly full of hope. Eh? He *knows* God to be alive and kicking; down to his very toenails. He's very able – he could be self-sufficient – but he chooses to live in dependence on God, not in his own strength. He's got a very nice job, thank you very much, but he has the confidence and freedom to let it go when he's glimpsed God calling somewhere else. With such vision, the excitement for God's work far out-narrates the personal cost.

As your bishop, I want to do the same. **To get real about the mess.** You might assume I've spent the last few years swanning around a lovely Palace when in reality Lambeth is nothing if not about serving the underbelly of the church. Which is not glorious. Whether it's about safeguarding or sex; whether the reaction is depression or false optimism, I'd suggest we must take some shared responsibility for a situation of exile - we need to name and claim some shame. [Sorry to be depressing]. Church wardens, school governors, leaders in church and society: please can we be like Nehemiah and *Tell it like it is* with each other? No gloss paint, no wall-paper. We don't have time or money to faff about. Please call me out where you see denial in me, and allow me to do the same for you. We're at a Point of No Return.

I also seek **to be real about God.** I stand here not on my CV or any charm or entitlement but on the strength of a clear sense of call and reliance on Christ alone. That doesn't mean I don't come to you in fear and trembling, but it does mean I also come with expectation and excitement. Even confidence. I know God's power to transform – in my own life and that of others. Seeing 'God at work' is the greatest privilege as a pastor and mentor: here there and everywhere. Spent most of the last 20 years training teachers and pastors – in Britain, in America and in Sudan. Bright young things – as well as older things – from refugee camps to merchant banks who were giving everything to be a part of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world. And had no need to look back.

Not long ago I sat down with a successful opera-singer called Jonathan. I last saw him on the stage of the London Coliseum. He's had a truckload of success, but underneath it all he's had some some heart-searchings and struggles in his own life. The truth is, he discovered A Point of No Return in his own frailty. I wonder if you know what Jonathan feels like. I wonder if you know what it means to reach a point of no return. What Jonathan found was that his brokenness became the point, the signal to change direction - from his own brokenness to train for the healing ministry. Maybe you're discovering the point of something. Maybe now is your Nehemiah moment.

I believe the church is at a point of no return. I believe we're at our Nehemiah moment. There's no hope, no joy, and no gospel in trying to restore what's dead and gone. When Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem, he wasn't trying to go back to the past. He was trying to found a future like there'd never been before. The Bible was written because Israel found in exile it was closer to God in exile than it had ever been in the Promised Land. And Nehemiah said, it's time to start again, to build new walls, make a new city out of the ashes of the old one, to turn the kingdom of Israel into the kingdom of God.

Are you ready to join me? Are you ready to be real about the mess, and not hide in nostalgia or sentimentality? Are you ready to be real about God, and excited about the God who finds us more in adversity and honesty than in prosperity and comfort? Are you ready like my friend Jonathan to recognise your point of no return and make this your Nehemiah moment?

Why does God give us points of no return? Because Jesus isn't the one who takes us back to a perfect past but the one who points us to a wondrous future. In Jesus God reached the point of no return. For God, the point of no return was the cross. The cross *was* the point. And for us there can be no return before that point. That's our salvation: that in Christ God offers us the point of no return.

So let's take up this Nehemiah moment. Let's for ourselves and for our church recognise that there's no return. Let's like Nehemiah build a future that's bigger than the past. Let's realise the point of no return. Because that point is the cross."

