
NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 5 – THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

Some young lads are crossing the Cornish moors late at night after an evening of sampling the local beer. They come across one of the many sink holes in the area and one of the lads suggests they throw a rock in to hear how deep the hole is from the consequent splash.

They only have one torch between them and they scout around in the dark for a suitable projectile. One of them finds a largish rock and throws it into the hole.

They hear a strange, slithering sound and then in the light of the torch beam they see the flash of the face of the most startled goat in Cornwall as he flies through the air, attached by rope to the rock, and disappears down the sink hole.

You may be asking what this story of the most startled goat in Cornwall has to do with our Bible reading today, and the answer is *Nothing*. I heard it once from a man from Cornwall and I just thought it was a great story.

So to business. The next in the series on Nehemiah. If you've been keeping count, and I have, this is episode five in the series.

The story so far...

Everything goes bad for the Jews of Jerusalem in 587BC when the king of Persia, Nebuchadnezzar, destroys Jerusalem, turns the temple into rubble, and ships off half the population to Babylon.

This was the time of Daniel and Jeremiah. The time of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The time of lions and of people living through a fiery furnace, and of the King dreaming about a big tree.

In 559BC, that's 28 years later, there's a new King in Persia, named Cyrus. He allows some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem. He agrees to help them rebuild the temple. You can read a long list of all the people who were in this party in the first chapter of Ezra. All told, 42,360 people went back plus 7,337 servants and 200 singers who were apparently not qualified to be counted as *people*.

There was a lot of political opposition. Listening to the Australian government and the mining companies deliver their different spins on the proposed super profits tax, reminded me of the lies and distortions that were told about the Jews in order to stop them rebuilding the temple. Same technique, different century. Anyway, the job got done in 516BC, but it had taken them 43 years.

Then 59 years further on, the new king of Persia, Artaxerxes, commissions Ezra in the year 457BC to go to Jerusalem as a kind of Governor.

And 21 years after this, that brings us to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah has a job as the sommelier to the King of Persia. That is, he tastes the wine and recommends it, or not, to the King. And since, the town of Shiraz in Persia is considered by many to be the place where the Shiraz grape originated from, you would think that being a wine-taster to the King of Persia would be a rather pleasant occupation.

“Would your excellency prefer the 445BC Shiraz or the 443BC shiraz tonight? Name your poison, sire.”

Well, maybe not. Because Nehemiah wasn't a real sommelier. Just the guy who tastes the King's wine to be sure it isn't poisoned.

Anyway, it seems Nehemiah's willingness to risk his life with every regal meal has made him friends of the King and this soon proves useful because Nehemiah hears that things aren't going well in Jerusalem.

And, as you heard in previous weeks, Nehemiah is given the job of rebuilding – phase 2 – namely rebuilding the city wall of Jerusalem.

He goes to Jerusalem in Chapter 2, and starts to build the wall in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, he faces some opposition and gets over it.

And that brings us to Chapter 5 that we heard read to us today.

Now this Chapter is an interesting sidebar to the saga of the wall building, because it's not about the wall at all. In Chapter 5 we have the story of two side issues that Nehemiah has to confront.

First, he has to deal with an issue of injustice within his own ranks. He has to stop the rich and powerful from oppressing the poor and vulnerable.

And second, we get an insight into Nehemiah's humility and generosity, two characteristics, I believe, of the most effective leaders, then and today.

In the first instance, of injustice, the problem appears to be caused by the inequality between the people who have just arrived back from Babylon, and those who have come earlier. The earlier arrivals, of course, have got hold of the best bits of land (and I've been to Jerusalem and can tell you there are not too many best bits of land there). The later arrivals are forced to rent land to live on and try to grow food.

But the new arrivals cannot make ends meet and they end up selling family members into slavery.

Well, when Nehemiah hears that this is going on, he is appalled. Actually it says, in verse 6, that he was “very angry”. Maybe “very angry” doesn't quite catch the strength of the original words here. He was *ablaze* with anger. He was furious. He was spitting chips.

But note what he does. In verse 7 it says, “I pondered them in my mind, and then accused.” What a wonderful lesson in how to deal with injustice. They say the first rule of spanking is that we should never hit a child in anger. I'm ashamed to say that the ONLY times my kids got spanked was when I was angry. If I could get over my anger I could always think of a more effective remedy.

Well, Nehemiah counted to ten. He let his anger subside BEFORE he accused. What wonderful self-control.

As Star Trekkers know, there is an old Klingon proverb that goes “revenge is a dish best served cold.” Those Klingons knew a thing or two apparently. Allow the heat of anger to cool and let wisdom get to work before you act.

Isn't the ability to control anger a wonderful asset? I think we have two patched holes in the walls at home from a couple of boys who in pre-teen days had more anger than control. And I was one parent who spanked each subsequent child less and less often as time went by. A consequence of improving my anger management more than the child's, I have to say.

I listened to Julia Gillard's first Question Time during the week. I was wonderfully impressed by her self-control. No matter how much the opposition goaded her, she remained cool. No matter what nasty or outrageously distorted proposition was put to her, our new PM politely thanked the opposition member for their question (I reckon I could almost hear her counting to ten under her breath). And then she responded with a witty remark followed by an answer which, as usual for a politician, had very little to do with the question.

But anger? Not a spark.

And this is a characteristic of Nehemiah's leadership style from which we can all learn. Don't react out of anger. Act out of wisdom.

So, having “paused to ponder” Nehemiah then accuses the unjust oppressors within the community. And he makes a stunning comparison. He points out that the new arrivals have come back from slavery in Babylon, only to find themselves enslaved by their own kin in Jerusalem. It was a comparison to which none of them could respond. They stood there like rebuked children. Like stunned mullets.

And then they agreed he was right, promised to repay those they had ripped off, and said Amen. And, it says in verse 13, “the people did as they had promised.”

Am I the only one who finds this just a bit too good to be true? Julia Gillard should be getting Nehemiah to negotiate with the miners! He tells them they are wrong. They agree. They do as they're told. Amazing.

How could this happen? Is Nehemiah some kind of magician? Is this some kind of Jedi Mind Game? *There are no Jedi here.*

Leaders have two kinds of authority. Position authority and Personal authority. You get Position authority from the position you hold. Most of us believe that a chief executive has more authority than a mail clerk, although I think Generation Y might be undermining this convention.

When a leader says “I'm the boss and I'm telling you to do it.” Well that leader is just using their position authority. Or trying to, anyway.

I'm sure all of us know bosses like this. Maybe quite a few of us have worked for these kinds of bosses who rely solely on the fact that they have a position. And they think this position gives them the right to tell others what to do. I call them *tin generals*.

Well, the best research of the last couple of decades has demonstrated that position authority is a weak kind of authority. Sometimes it produces good short-term results. But the effect of position authority has a short shelf life. It's got a use-by date somewhere between bananas and sponge cake. It doesn't last long.

And the reasons it doesn't work for long are pretty clear. No-one LIKES being bossed around by somebody who just issues orders. If we have to suffer these kinds of leaders, we won't suffer them for long. Staff leave. The organisation suffers from a constant revolving door. Knowledge goes out the door with every departure. And time is wasted training new people with every replacement. Organisational efficiency drops. Profits disappear. The Board calls the boss to account. Then give him a golden handshake and he goes to Portafino.

Position authority doesn't get the job done. Not all by itself anyway.

The other kind of authority is personal authority. This is the kind of authority that comes from who the leader is. How the leader behaves. How the leader relates to people.

And it is no accident that the second half of Chapter 5 shows us something really important about Nehemiah's personal authority.

In contrast to the exploiters within their ranks, Nehemiah is personally generous. He's not an ivory tower leader who sits behind a big desk in the corner office.

For the 12 years he worked with the people, he worked as a volunteer. Well, it's not exactly clear where Nehemiah got his money from. Some commentators suggest he must have saved up his shekels during his time checking the King's wine for hemlock. Maybe he was well rewarded.

But what IS clear is that, as governor he was entitled to receive a tax from the people together with food and wine for his consumption. Previous governors had taxed the people forty shekels of silver each. That's about \$400 in today's money. There must have been at least 70,000 people living in Jerusalem at the time, so that would have been an annual income of \$28 million. But that's a guess. Because we are not sure how much a shekel weighed, nor what the value of silver was then, nor how many people actually had to pay the tax.

The point is that Nehemiah took none of this entitlement. Not one shekel he was entitled to. Not one bit of food or wine for his table.

On the contrary, he fed the people and lent them money when they needed it.

More than that, he went to work on the wall just like everyone else. All his men were "assembled there for the work" it says in verse 16. Don't you love a boss who isn't too proud to join in the work?

When I arrived at my present job I was blessed with a personal assistant. I didn't ask for a PA, but I got one anyway. I didn't think chief executives of medium sized businesses had personal assistants in the 21st century. But anyway, there she was, and she was going to organise my life for me.

After a couple of weeks I noticed that we had a roster for stacking the dishwasher in the staff lunch room. I checked the names on it, and found only one was missing. Mine.

I suggested to my personal assistant that she might like to add my name to the list. After all, I could stack and unstack a dishwasher at home. She might like to imagine I could just as easily do it at work.

"Oh Mr Hunt," she said. She called me "Mr Hunt" which might tell us something.

"Oh Mr Hunt, we can't have the boss doing the housework," she said with a shocked look on her face.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t think we can have the boss NOT doing the housework.”

Very reluctantly, she put my name on the list. In the end, I have to tell you, she was smarter than me. Whenever I went to stack the dishwasher during my week, I found she had already beaten me to it.

Of course the point I was trying to make was that people watch their leaders all the time. And one of the most powerful things a leader can do is to model right behaviour to the team. Too many leaders follow the rule of “Do as I say, not as I do” yet the most powerful influence on an organisation’s culture is the example the boss lives out for the team to see.

Regrettably, this point, that I was trying to model an inclusive, team approach to work, was entirely lost on my personal assistant. It led to her early retirement.

Well, Nehemiah had more influence over his assistants. He positioned himself as one member of a team engaged in a clearly focussed endeavour. It was about rebuilding the wall. Therefore he worked on the wall, like he wanted everyone to do.

And this is why he succeeded as a leader. A great leader. His personal authority grew with every selfless act of support for the people. His personal authority reinforced and validated his position authority.

So that’s the message of Chapter 5, I reckon. It’s a lesson about what leaders should concern themselves with. In this case, the welfare of the people in the first place, and the power of modelling right behaviour as a leader.

It’s easy to think of leaders who don’t model right behaviour. Too easy, regrettably.

But let’s not scapegoat bad leaders. Instead we should see that Nehemiah was a precursor of the kind of leader who would demonstrate more than anyone before or since the difference between position and personal authority.

One who, although he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but humbled himself, taking on the very nature of a servant.

Jesus’ impact on our world comes less from his position than on the way he behaved. Yes, he was God. But that’s not what impresses us.

We follow him because he became like us. Jesus became, like Nehemiah, one of the people. He humbled himself and became obedient to death.

I always find it interesting how much eternal truth is in the Bible that gets rediscovered later. You know there is a fundraising exercise hidden away in 2nd Corinthians that exhibits all the hallmarks of modern fundraising? The eternal truths of how to run a fundraising campaign. And it was all written down two thousand years ago.

Just a few years ago, extensive research by Jim Collins and his students, defined the kind of leaders that create sustainable success in organisations. The kind of leaders that turn good organisations into great organisations. He called these leaders Level 5 leaders. He was describing exactly the kind of leadership that we see in Nehemiah and Jesus.

The Bible is a pretty useful book. I commend it to you.