

HOW DO YOU CHANGE A NATION?

6.30pm Sunday 17th January 2016 (Epiphany 2)

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I have been very interested to hear President Obama say, *"I can't sit back and do nothing about guns"*. And I was very saddened when several Americans who were interviewed said, *"If you take away our guns the country will be a much LESS safe place"*. People are blind and so stuck in their ways.

So the question is: HOW DO YOU CHANGE A NATION?

With this in mind, let us look at Nehemiah & Ezra.

The people Judah were in Exile in Persia.

The land of Judah was deserted. Jerusalem had been flattened. No walls. No Temple. The year is about 444BC.

And far away from Jerusalem is a Jew in Susa, the capital of Persia, serving the King of Persia as a Cupbearer. His name is Nehemiah. One day, as he serves the King, the King asks him why he is looking so sad. And after a bit of flattery telling the King that to serve him is the greatest delight of his life! Nehemiah says he is sad because the walls of Jerusalem lie in ruins.

The outcome is that Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem, with the Kings authority and blessing. He is made Governor of Judah and he rebuilds the walls, despite some opposition.

The point is this:

Nehemiah had NO ILLUSIONS about what he as Governor could do.

YES, he could build the walls. And walls are good: They protect a city against enemies from without, they give courage to its citizens, merchants can trade and priests and scholars can go about their work safely BUT WALLS CANNOT PROTECT AGAINST THE ENEMY WITHIN.

Walls cannot protect from the enemy within.

In this respect, Nehemiah's powers were very limited.

And Nehemiah knew this.

-A Governor can build walls.

-A Governor can introduce ways of working.

-A Governor can punish law-breakers.

But a Governor CANNOT CONTROL THE HEART.

A Governor cannot persuade the people to repent.

Only the Law of God can do that.

SO, what does Nehemiah do?

Answer: he writes to the King of Persia and asks for Ezra the Scribe to be allowed to come to Jerusalem with the Book of the Law.

And eight months after Nehemiah writes his begging letter, Ezra leaves Persia with a great caravan of the most respected Jews and a huge amount of gold and silver and a very large number of animals for sacrifice in Jerusalem.

In the middle of Jerusalem Nehemiah has a great platform made with a high pulpit constructed so that literally thousands can all see one man.

First, Nehemiah spends a whole month offering sacrifices.

Then Nehemiah calls all the people together, tells them to be silent and to listen carefully. Nehemiah then says to Ezra,

"Read the Book of the Law to the people. Read it word for word. Read it clearly and explain it so the people can understand because the people have forgotten Egypt, they have forgotten Sinai and the Wilderness. They have forgotten the Covenant!"

At dawn, Ezra begins to read the Book of Genesis. He does so with a rhythm that slowly rocks his body. The people listen. By midday there is the sound of weeping and crying. The Word of the Lord has touched their hearts.

Ezra sends the people home saying, *"Do not weep. This day is holy and special to the Lord. Eat. Drink. And give portions to the poor. The joy of the Lord is your strength"*

**The question is: HOW LONG does repentance last?
-For years? Or will it vanish with the dawn of the next day?**

Nehemiah was encouraged by the weeping of the people as they heard the Book of the Law being read. BUT HE WAS ALSO A PRACTICAL MAN. So he waited for three months.

Did the people give their tithes? NO, the treasury was empty. The Temple could not be repaired. **SO NEHEMIAH ACTED BY DECREE and passed a Law requiring that all tithes be paid.**

Did the people observe the Sabbath? NO, so Nehemiah ruled that the Gates of Jerusalem be closed on the Sabbath. But what did the merchants do? They set up their stalls OUTSIDE the city gates! So Nehemiah went out in his golden chariot with armed soldiers and threatened to arrest every stall holder who traded and drove them away.

Did the people honour marriage? NO, Nehemiah found that the grandson of the High Priest, just three months from the Reading of the Law, had divorced his wife of only two years and married another. A Samaritan.

So what did Nehemiah do?

He went to Ezra the Scribe.

And Ezra re-assembled the people again and taught them and told them to separate themselves from foreign wives. And the people said, "*We will do as you have said*"

HOW DO YOU CHANGE A NATION?

-It seems there must be a PARTNERSHIP.

Judah changed as a result of the partnership between Nehemiah and Ezra. A partnership between a Governor and a Scribe, between a politician and a priest. **Between one who could deal with the enemy from without and one who could deal with the enemy from within.**

Nehemiah and Ezra NEEDED EACH OTHER.

So WHO does President Obama need?