

November 3, 2002  
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Nehemiah is arguably the Bible's best example of a man of the world who was also a godly man, deeply reflective and much given to prayer.

A Jew trained in the diplomatic and executive skills of the Persian court, Nehemiah was possessed of a firm grasp on how to get things done. The Bible calls him a royal cup-bearer, but this term should not make us think of a simple domestic servant. That bearing of the cup at the king's table was but the symbolic function of an individual of great importance in the realm. The term "royal chamberlain" comes closer to the modern idiom, for this was no menial position. The Persian art of the period portrays the cup-bearer ranked second, right after the crown prince, in the gradations of the royal court. Archeology indicates, moreover, that sometimes cup-bearers were buried in the same crypts as the emperor's own family. Nehemiah, then, was a high official of the realm, the ancient equivalent to our "prime minister." All important business with the crown passed through his hands.

In December of the year 445 (Nehemiah 1:1), certain fellow Jews came from Jerusalem to see Nehemiah at the court of Artaxerxes 1, bearing the sad news that some local opposition back in the Holy Land, evidently implementing an official decree, had put a stop to the construction of the walls around the city of Jerusalem (1:2-3). It is impossible that Nehemiah did not know this already, but the first-hand report gave him a strong new impression of the full tragedy of the situation. It threw him into a depression for days, a depression accompanied by fasting and prayer (1:4). This is our first of many examples of Nehemiah in prayer.

Fortified by prayer and fasting, Nehemiah prepared to argue his case before Artaxerxes. He bided his time until the following spring, Nisan, the month of the Passover. Doubtless Nehemiah was waiting for the most opportune and advantageous moment, watching the movement of government, carefully observing the emperor's moods and attitudes. He resolved finally to display his feelings; it was not an inadvertent dropping of his guard, but a calculated move (2:1), and the emperor, as expected, noticed (2:2). There was a sudden tense moment, because ancient potentates liked to be surrounded by happy, healthy faces (cf. Daniel 1:10-13!). Nehemiah stated the matter quickly and succinctly, for Persian emperors were busy, efficient men, not famous for their patience. In addition, they could be terribly fickle and capricious (cf. Esther 4:11!). Nehemiah knew all this, and even while he spoke to Artaxerxes, he continued to speak to God in his heart (2:4). We know his brief prayer was efficacious, because he managed to make his complaint without criticizing either the emperor or anyone in the Persian government.

Nehemiah was the consummate diplomat, schooled in the arts of a complex international court. In that scene with Artaxerxes, for example, Nehemiah only answered the emperor's question. He made no request until the king explicitly asked for one, and we observe that the

request, made at precisely the moment when it should have been made, was immediately granted.

Likewise, throughout the book named after him, we ever find Nehemiah playing a cool, deft hand, maintaining strict control over the cards held close to his chest. His several opponents, always obliged to guess what hand he was holding, ever acting in the dark, were no match for him. In every instance we watch Nehemiah disclosing only as much information as was needed to accomplish what he had in mind. His adversaries never found out about anything he did until it was too late to stop him. If anyone wants to examine what it means to be as cunning as a serpent (which Jesus our Lord commands us to be), he will discover no better example than Nehemiah.

For a man accustomed to dealing with the administration of an empire that stretched from the Khyber Pass to the Danube River, the modest organization required for building the walls of Jerusalem was scarcely a challenge. Sections of the work were apportioned to various families, villages, and professions, and the construction of the walls was completed in record time. Overseeing the construction all the while, the self-possessed, reflective Nehemiah talked with God in short, frequent, and fervent prayers that are interspersed throughout the narrative (2:8,10,20; 3:36-37; 4:9; 5:13,19; 6:14,16; 13:14,22,31,39).

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