

# 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2024

## The paper-version Service



**To Begin:** Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe,

light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you

have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service.



The Good  
Shepherd  
Four Marks

Responding to God's Love

**Opening Prayer:** Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Song:**

What can wash away my sin?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.  
What can make me whole again?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

O precious is the flow  
that makes me white as snow;  
no other fount I know;  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

For my pardon this I see:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.  
For my cleansing this my plea:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

O precious is the flow  
that makes me white as snow;

no other fount I know;  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Nothing can for sin atone:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.  
Naught of good that I have done:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

O precious is the flow  
that makes me white as snow;  
no other fount I know;  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my hope and peace:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my righteousness:  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

## The Sermon by Timothy James

### Read Nehemiah 12:27-47, Luke 1:67-80 – Praise

We begin to approach the end of our story: with God's help the wall has been completed, against serious opposition, and now God's temple is surrounded by God's city.

In chapter 8, we heard how the completion of this physical rebuilding was followed by a spiritual rebuilding: Ezra and his Levite assistants read aloud God's law to the assembled people, and expounded, explained and applied it so they could understand (Neh. 8:8).

What have we missed in the intervening chapters? Two significant events:

- First, in chapter 9 another assembly was held, when the Levites led the people in a confession of their disobedience and rebellion, and a solemn commitment to obey in future, culminating in a **formal written covenant**, signed and executed by all the people's leaders;
- Second, in chapters 10 and 11 and the first half of chapter 12, we are told how the city was repopulated by people, Levites and priests who committed to moving in from the surrounding villages and towns, to **form a community** within the new walls serving the rebuilt temple.

And now they **celebrate!** A huge and joyful musical ceremony is held (vv.27-43), marking the boundaries of the city and culminating at "the house of God" (v.40). They were celebrating the restoration of temple worship, the commitment to obedience to scripture and the restoring of the community of God's people.

Nehemiah has **completed the mission** God set for him in chapter 1, and God's people **rejoice** fervently (and loudly! (v.43)) at its completion, and **commit themselves** to purification, to worshipping God and to supporting those selected to lead his worship (vv.44-47).

So, happy ending, right?

**Spoiler alert:** like earlier great revival events, this one ends in anti-climax: this revival ran out of steam, as previous revivals had done.

Why does the Bible tell us about these events? Why does this great celebration not represent the new beginning that it appears to promise?

This is best answered by looking at its place in the big story – "the whole counsel of scripture".

The events of Nehemiah are clearly in **partial fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy** (Jer. 31), when at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, the prophet foretold the return of the survivors, the restoration of their fields and vineyards and the rejoicing and music which would accompany the return (Jer. 31:4). The prophecy culminates (Jer. 31:31-34) in this way:

*"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them”, declares the Lord.*

*“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

*No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*

These words seem in one way to describe the events of which we are reading; but the promise of the prophecy seems frustrated by the repeated failure of God’s people to follow through on their commitment to fulfil their part of the covenant which God has, once more, made with them.

But we now read Jeremiah 31 in the light of a **new and radically different covenant**.

This is the covenant Jesus inaugurated when he said *“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”* (Lk. 22:20). We commit ourselves to that covenant every time we take communion, and its difference from the covenant which Nehemiah and Ezra attempted to renew between God and his people is explained in this way:

*Obedience to the Law is not a **prior condition** for entering the New Covenant. Rather, it is one of the **promised blessings** of the New Covenant. (Ryken)*

*Things **required by the law** are **bestowed by the gospel**. God demands obedience under the law: God works obedience under the gospel. Holiness is asked of us by the law: holiness is wrought in us by the gospel. (Spurgeon)*

That which is always beyond our power to perform is performed for us by Jesus’ sacrifice of himself for our forgiveness. Jeremiah’s prophecy is fulfilled by the writing of God’s law on our hearts by the entry of the Holy Spirit.

This is why the penitential season of Lent can be a joyful lead-up to the celebration of Easter, when we rejoice in the act which broke *“the power of cancelled sin”* (Wesley), and made the final and complete fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy a reality in our lives.

So what should we do?

1. When God has blessed us, and particularly when he has enabled and empowered us to carry out a task he has given us, we should give him **praise**.
2. We should **consecrate** ourselves to follow through with our commitments.
3. But it is never enough without **new hearts**, which we cannot provide for ourselves, but which are always and only the gift of God.

**The 3rd Sunday of Lent:** Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

**The Lord's Prayer:** *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.*

**Blessing** to be declared over yourselves, The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

**The Notices:** We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am and 9.30am, and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is generally available the week after the service.

- Tea and Chat: March 20<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: March 20<sup>th</sup> at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: March 27<sup>th</sup> at 10.30am in Church Hall.
- Tea and Praise: Sunday March 24<sup>th</sup> at 3.00pm
- The Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday in Church.
- COGS Tots and Tinytots are on Mondays.
- Messy Church: Second Sundays of the month.