

Sunday School Notes: 23 September 2018: A Heritage Day celebration!

Within 52 days the wall round Jerusalem was rebuilt and the city was safe! That's quite amazing especially when one considers that the other exiles had been back in Jerusalem for years and hadn't managed to get the job done. God really had blessed them through Nehemiah's leadership and wisdom.

And now it was time to celebrate!

Ps 126 vv1-3 describes how they felt:

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,
When God brought us back from exile and helped us rebuild Jerusalem .
We laughed and we sang,
We couldn't believe our good fortune.
We were the talk of the nations –
"God was wonderful to them!" (*the nations said*)
God was wonderful to us;
We are one happy people.

Celebration doesn't mean ignoring problems. Nehemiah records that the enemies were afraid as they had lost face for they recognised that "this work had been accomplished with the help of our God". (6:16) Nonetheless Nehemiah put guards on duty to make sure that the enemies didn't try to attack the newly-built wall.

But they couldn't celebrate properly without knowledge. So a great big wooden platform was built in the main square and Ezra (who wrote the book of *Ezra*) opened the 'book of the law' (scrolls containing the word of God given to Moses in the wilderness) and read this out to the people from early morning to midday, explaining as he went along. (8:1-4, 8)

The people realised that they had forgotten lots of God's instructions and they wept because they were so sorry about it. But Ezra reminded them that this was meant to be a day of celebration, not a day of weeping.

Then Ezra sent them home to have a celebration meal, reminding them that when they must not forget the poorer people who had nothing. Each family was to send out food to others in need. In other words, they must obey God's instructions to care for the poor.

So it was a special day. But it wasn't the end of the celebrations – just the beginning.

As the people learnt more and more about God's word, they discovered that they were supposed to be celebrating the festival of booths at that time of year. So the people built tents of branches on their house tops or courtyards and in the public squares and lived in these for 7 days, as God had commanded. They were remembering how their ancestors had lived in the wilderness and how God had looked after them. Every day they were taught from the book of the law so every day they were hearing more and more about God and every day they were thinking more and more about him.

Now they were ready for the next step. As a nation, they made promises to God. They promised to walk in God's ways. They didn't just make a vague statement. They were very specific about what they would do and what they knew they mustn't do.

And then, they were ready to dedicate the wall of Jerusalem to God. It was like a heritage day confirmation service! And it must have been incredibly exciting. It was certainly noisy for the Bible says they could be heard "far away" (12:43). Scary for the enemies!!!

Two groups of choirs led the procession on the wall, one going right and one going round left. They had cymbals and harps and lyres (like guitars) and sang and danced as they went. Then a number of leaders all followed them, some going right and some left. (Remember the enemies had said the wall would break if a fox jumped on it! And now all these people were marching along it!)

When the two groups met near the temple, everyone was waiting in the square outside and everyone had presents for the Lord – grapes and wheat and olives and anything else they had grown. These were their offerings to God and would be used to look after the poor and to feed the priests who were too busy working for God to farm for themselves.

They prayed and asked God to bless their city.

We are celebrating a Heritage Day today. We know there are still many problems in South Africa, but still we celebrate what God has done for us here, remembering that God is in charge of our country and to ask him to forgive us for doing wrong and to lead us in the future.