The New shofar

Stop looking for the perfect church. It does not exist. Even if it did exist, the moment you or I joined it, it would no longer be perfect! ***-Nicky Gumbel***

JANUARY 26th

What we plant in faithfulness, God grows

As the Babylonians were massing for their final assault on Jerusalem, Jeremiah made a series of revelations from God… (**chapters 33-36**) *Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord* (**Jeremiah 33:11**). … It is quite stunning in its audacity, in the depth of the Hope that seems to radiate throughout these final chapters of his prophesy. What was he on about? There could have been some 5,000 Babylonian soldiers across the land making the fate of the City certain. And yet, there was Jeremiah, talking as though they were to be the winders!

The Book of Ezekiel goes further, containing the first record of the ***New*** Jerusalem. Within **Ezekiel 40–48,** there is an extended and detailed description of the measurements of the Temple, its chambers, porticos, and walls. The things about which they were speaking were not understood in the same way by the people at the time of Nehemiah. He was committed to <u>*rebuilding*</u> the physical building.

The Setting:

The Jewish people were exiled by Babylon into captivity for about 70 years, after which Persia conquered Babylon and released a remnant of the Jews to return to their homeland, Jerusalem. At that time 50,000 Israelites did return and began immediately <u>*to rebuild*</u> the demolished Temple.

A few years later, Haggai and Zechariah appeared on the scene, pointed out the people's neglect, and challenged them to finish the job. This they completed twenty years after their initial return. Sixty more years passed and then, under Ezra's leadership, more of the remnant returned to Jerusalem. For ninety years after the Jews returned, the people of God lived in affliction and shame in a city with broken walls and burned gates.

One official in the Persian court called Nehemiah, a highly ranked advisor to the King, who had never even been to Jerusalem until then, grieved that Jerusalem was in such a state of disrepair and believed God was calling him to action… *I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favour in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may <u>rebuild it</u>* **Nehemiah 2:4-5**.

Francis of Assisi – Rebuild my Church

San Damiano was an old crusader's chapel near Assisi that had fallen into ruin when St Francis stumbled across it. Above the altar hung an icon of Christ on the cross and it drew Francis' attention. Kneeling in the church alone that day in 1205, Francis heard the voice of God telling him, *Go and <u>rebuild</u> my church*. The word of God, a

word spoken directly to his heart, pointed to a direction for his life. Initially he began by gathering stones and carrying out maintenance and repairs to the physical building. But that was not the vocation God had in mind for this diminutive future saint. What God wanted was *a spiritual rebuilding* of the entire people of God.

John Lateran was, and remains today, the cathedral church of Rome and the official ecclesiastical seat of the pope as bishop of Rome. Indeed, it is the mother church of Roman Catholicism worldwide. The pope at the time was struggling in a world torn apart by violence, moral turpitude, greed and just about every other sin imaginable. The economy was booming but darkness dominated daily life.

It was a time too when the church had become weak and in need of reform. Before Francis, saints like Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and popes like Gregory VII (1015-1085) and Innocent III (1160-1216) sought renewal and change. But the church was looking for a saint and a saint was what God sent.

And so, when Francis of Assisi came with twelve disciples to see the pope in Rome about reforming the church in the summer of 1220, he came at the right time. They say that the pope had a dream the night before that St. John Lateran, the mother church of Christendom, was falling and a young man resembling the 28-year-old Francis came to hold its walls up. The pope was a good judge of people and, sensing the grace of God in Francis, told him to live those gospel teachings, sending him on his way. Francis and his companions started a movement that spread like fire throughout Europe.

The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain

Both Nehemiah and Francis had similar vocations from God – restore the heart of the people of God. Both began the same way, and both only later came to understand that what God was wanting was a renewal of the hearts and minds of His people. He wanted a people who had, in the words of Jeremiah, a faithful people in whom*… I (God) will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people*. The Temple, with its system of sacrifices, priesthood and myriads of laws, customs and regulations could not do that. God had patiently awaited the old covenant to build faithfulness into the lives of His Chosen People. It had not and could not. Never.

Building the Body of Christ

As Christians, we are all members of the body of Christ, and what God does in us is designed to be a means of His working through us. Each member of the body is ***being built up*** as we discover how God has uniquely gifted us and as we engage in works of service. This is not a passive *building up*, but an active one. We are *built up* individually to be witnesses in our day to day lives, but we are also *built up* corporately, being encouraged, supported and motivated by others in the church. As the body of Christ is being *built up,* our knowledge of the Son of God becomes not just propositional but experiential. *This is the ultimate goal of the Christian life—that we know Christ and we go on knowing Him.*

Every part of the body is equally important. When God created us, it was for an intended purpose, and we are the only ones who can carry out that calling. Failing to take up that calling means the entire Body of Christ will struggle. God wants us. Needs us. Calls us.