

P roclaiming the Good News of Christ

E ncouraging spiritual growth through Bible-reading and prayer

A ccepting all-comers from all nations

C elebrating God and each other

E nabling all to use their gifts in mutual service

from Nehemiah 8 : 1-12

¹ All the people assembled with one accord in the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem. They told Ezra, the teacher of the Law, to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses. ² So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The priests instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra, and the priests who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." [For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.]

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

1 Thessalonians 5 : 12-24

¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³

Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.

Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸

give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject whatever is harmful.

²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Last week, I did a quick search on the internet for : 'mission statement'- and discovered 'How to write (one)'. It said this :

"A good mission statement is written in 2 parts.

In the first.. you outline (what business) you're in and what you offer...

The second.. (is about) the strategies.. you follow to achieve success."

In other words, a mission statement says what an organisation does and how they do it. Oh - and sometimes a 'mission' statement is called a 'vision' statement. The 2 words don't mean exactly the same thing, of course : a mission is a job someone is sent to do ; a vision is a clear idea of where we're heading.

As Christians, we all have a basic mission - to live in God's will and share our faith. And we all have a vision - a vision of God's kingdom of love and justice. At the other end of the spectrum, there's a mission and a vision for each of us as individuals. But today we're in the middle : we're looking at the mission, the vision of this Church : the Peace Church Mission Statement.

Remember the website? The statement should :

1) outline (what business) we're in and what we offer...

and 2) explain the strategies.. we follow to achieve success -

that is : what we do, and how we aim to do it. So, back to P- E- A- C-E!

And our two readings give us some nice examples of the biblical basis for

everything in it.....

PROCLAIMING the Good News of Christ is our core purpose – our prime mission - from Jesus himself - - so it's a good thing that PEACE starts with the letter 'P'!!

Without the Good News of Jesus, we have nothing to offer people that a social, self-help group couldn't offer just as well...

Without the Good News of Jesus, we have nothing strong enough to really bring us together, given all our different backgrounds, nationalities and life experiences.

Without the Good News of Jesus, we have no sound base for advice or guidance in everyday life.....

Proclamation is a lovely word – and of course, those of us privileged to to preach *proclaim* from the pulpit. But that's not enough! The Good News is proclaimed when we read the scriptures aloud – when we sing the gospel in hymns and songs – when we stand up at sharing time and bear witness to God's goodness - when we discuss at Bible Study - when we talk over coffee and share our own experience of God at work...

Here in Nehemiah's open-air worship, PROCLAMATION is at the forefront. God's Word is read aloud – and explained.

Proclaiming the Good News of Christ is something we should never fight shy of : it is, after all, VERY GOOD News!

The church I was taken to as a child had a strong mission to PROCLAIM the Good News of Jesus. By the time I left home at 18, I'd heard the basics of faith countless times.... But that last summer, we had a visiting speaker. And he made a really, really important point that has stayed with me ever since.... *The church must tell us how to become a Christian - but then, it must also tell us how to BE the Christian we've become....*

When I thought about it, I'd heard the same Good News explained over and over – quite rightly - but I hadn't heard anything like as much about how to live day by day, following Jesus.....

So it's absolutely essential that after P for Proclamation, we have E for – E for Encouraging spiritual growth. We can accept the good news of Jesus for ourselves – we can become members of Peace Church - but we won't enjoy our faith much, and we won't be much use to God or the church, if we don't then GROW spiritually, if we don't mature as believers and go on growing...

Our mission statement specifies that we must encourage this growth “through Bible-reading and prayer”... Bible-reading and prayer, because both of these activities give us time with God; time to get to know God better; time to let the Holy Spirit work on us!

The readings today contain both . In Nehemiah, God's Word is read and explained as we've said – and - MORE IMPORTANTLY! – LISTENED TO! and UNDERSTOOD! v4 - “all the people listened attentively” v8 - “the people understood”

Spiritual growth is what happens when individual believers connect with what is being proclaimed – connect with what is being taught, take it to heart and make it their own. If we listen ATTENTIVELY - and we all know that that's quite different from just hearing! – if we listen attentively, then God the Holy Spirit can work in us... .. as he did with these people.. because – v9 - “all the people had been weeping (*weeping!*) as they listened”. The people felt the impact of God's Word so deeply that they wept! And we can guess from the context that some of those tears were shed out of grief for how far they had strayed from God's ways.. ... They listened, they understood, they responded and their behaviour changed..

A couple of Christmases ago, I was asked to preach at an all-age service in our home church in England... three weeks later, back in Munich, I got a letter from a young mum who'd been there. Something in the bible reading – and the comment made about it – had left her feeling grieved –grieved in this case that there had been this rift with her brother-in-law for months and months - they weren't on speaking terms. She hadn't wanted that – but she hadn't dared do anything about it, in case she was rejected.... Well, that particular day, this sentence from the bible had stuck with her... Back home, once Dad was playing with the children, she'd sat down and prayed about the problem – and then she'd taken pen and paper and written her brother-in-law a letter. She'd been amazed, because the letter had been so much easier to write than she would ever have imagined...

She'd listened attentively – she'd understood – and she'd been sufficiently moved to do something as a result – something that freed her from hurt and that changed a whole relationship...

That's the way the Holy Spirit works.... through the Bible and prayer... and that's the way we can go on growing spiritually - or, as Paul puts it here, be sanctified. He prays that God may “sanctify (us) through and through”. That means that God will make us holy – make us like Jesus.... ‘Sanctify’ isn't a word just for saints in books – it's for every believer to take seriously... No wonder that involves prayer! Paul says “Pray continually”. And we do, here at Peace Church – on Sundays, through the week at meetings and Bible Studies, in Sunday School, in the Prayer Chain... but never enough! Because we can always be praying more – and the Church depends on the prayers of its individual members.

The more we pray, the better.....

So – it's A's turn!

A for Accepting all-comers from all nations. Jesus told his followers to 'go into all the world and preach the good news'..... At Peace Church, we have the wonderful experience of 'all the world' coming to us – or so it seems.... As an English-speaking church in a German-speaking country, I think it's absolutely right that we put this in our mission statement.

We have a special responsibility to make people feel at home wherever they come from. Sometimes different cultures will clash – and cause us problems... But God knows that – and Paul's letter to an overseas church has very practical advice: listen to vv13-15:

"Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else."

Accepting everyone means welcoming people whoever they are, wherever they come from. It doesn't mean allowing one person or one group to be idle, always taking and never giving; it doesn't mean allowing anyone to disrupt or damage the group; it doesn't mean letting people get back at someone who's upset them. It does mean respecting those who work hard in our church; it does mean doing what we can to have good, peaceable relationships with one another; it does mean encouraging anyone who is feeling low or disheartened; helping anyone who is feeling weak and helpless; striving hard to do what's good for the community. It does mean – perhaps the key thing! – being patient with everyone!!

Let's remember that the culture of Christ is more important than any other culture we're part of – and His wide-open arms are for all of us....!

C is for CELEBRATING !

(one reason why I think the name of the new singing group is really apt!)

Celebrating God is something we do in every Sunday service : we praise God in word and song.... Here in Nehemiah, the people praise; they lift their hands – they shout "Amen" ; they bow down; they have a party.... v.12 says they "celebrate with great joy".... Singing, moving, praying – they're all part of celebrating God – so are the pictures the children colour - so is everything we offer to God with real praise in our hearts. Celebrating each other follows on naturally. Celebration is a basic activity for Christians. Paul tells us to rejoice always (v16), to be thankful – always to count our blessings, whatever our circumstances – and to appreciate other church people who work hard for us.

If we can get the hang of this – if we can really make a habit of

celebrating God's goodness and celebrating the contribution of other people – then it will have a massive effect on the kind of people we are; it will have a massive effect on our outlook on life. Celebrating 'with great joy' leaves its mark on people – and it's part of the mark of the Holy Spirit.

Well, E is the End of the word PEACE! And this E is about all of us and it's about all of us working. E says we aim to enable every person to use his or her gifts in service.

The Bible talks about all kinds of God-given gifts – the gift of administration; the gift of welcoming; of giving; of serving; of leading; of caring for others; of teaching..... and so on and so on... We are told that we all, - yes, every single believer! – have a gift from God to help build up the church. *And if we don't know what our gift is – then we need to find out in 2007!*

Looking at the readings - Nehemiah clearly had a gift of administration – he was the governor – the priests had the gift of teaching and caring; many must have had the gift of giving and sharing... Various roles that Paul mentions are also gifts : – gifts of leadership, of helping, of teaching, of 'admonishing' – that is, putting people straight; - of speaking prophecies – that is, specific messages from God – and, *very important*, the gift of discernment – that is, seeing what is genuinely from God and what isn't – 'test all prophecies', says Paul here, 'hold on to what is good, reject whatever is harmful'. The ability to do that is a gift only God can give.

As a church, we need constantly to encourage people to use their gifts for the good of the Church as a whole – catering, teaching, tidying, singing, caring, organising – whatever it is... it's part of our mission to have those gifts recognised and used, as individuals discover their own mission and vision before God.

P- E -A- C- E does spell PEACE – and that's where I'd like to finish – with 2 gems from Paul : "Live in peace with each other" and "May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through."

What better mission, what better vision for 2007 could we have, than to pray that we will live in peace with each other and that our God, the God of peace, may sanctify us through and through. AMEN

Let us pray. Loving God, We thank you that you give us a purpose /and a vision for the way ahead./ Thank-you for our mission as a church. We pray that you will guide us all as we seek to know your will for this coming year in specific ways./ We pray for your guidance for us as a

church./We pray for your guidance for us as individuals.Show us how to live in peace with each other./ And we pray that you will help us to grow spiritually these next 12 months... We pray that you will indeed sanctify us through and through. And we thank you that you have called us; that you are faithful and that you will do it. Forgive us, Lord, for the times when we try to make ourselves holy- or better -or more purposeful; for when we make up our own mission or follow our own vision. Show us how to listen attentively to you instead.

Show us how to get so close to you that you can sanctify us, that we may live out your mission and your vision for us and for this church.

In Jesus' precious Name, Amen.