



## *The new*SHOFAR

*Ordinary Sunday 21*

Matthew 16:13-20 - Isaiah 51:1-6

### **My justice will become a light to the nations.**

I can remember when I first read this verse in Isaiah. My first thought was “How?” Just how is God making divine justice a light to the nations, remembering that “the nations” are the Gentiles? This is Israel after the Exile in Babylon, a nation torn apart by war and all of the horrors associated with war at that time – diseases, famine, starvation, attacks by bands of stateless warriors and more. Why would the nations look at Israel and desire to have the justice their God Yahweh has poured out upon them?

The reality for Isaiah is that the Hebrew people have now been reduced to a stump, a remnant of the people whose empire spread from the mountains to the sea. She was bullied and attacked by the nations around here, particularly Moab and Edom and it was difficult to explain their ongoing existence. They remembered how the northern kingdom of Israel had gone off into exile in Assyria and had never returned. That nation was no more. Why then does Judah continue to survive?

### **God has a plan! We all have a purpose!**

The point the prophet is making is that sin does not stop God's plan from continuing. Yes, they broke the covenant, turned to false gods and made themselves just *like the nations* around them. They did not deserve the love and mercy God was offering them. Israel was never really meant to be about Israel. She was a people called to live for God, to make herself one with God and live in the way God wanted all men and women to live. She was the way all men and women were invited to be living. The nations were to be able to look at Israel, the day to day life of the Hebrew people and say “we want the blessings that come from living that kind of life”. The People of God were to be the hands of God in creation, the face of God before the peoples of the world – and they failed miserably. What is important is that their failure was not the end of hope for the rest of the world, it did not bring God's plans to an end.

### **What God did for Israel is being done for us in and through Jesus**

This section of the Gospel of Matthew in which we find this reading is generally referred to as Jesus' teaching on the Church and is of crucial importance for those seeking to live in the world as disciples of Christ. Jesus sets down for us his understanding of who we are meant to be, how we are to live and the way we need to view the world around us.

Notice how today's reading begins with an observation as to how the world is confused about Jesus. They have seen what he has been doing, heard his teachings and watched his style of living and so asked: *who is this man?* For Matthew, this is one of the fundamental questions needing to be both asked and answered by anyone seeking a life of discipleship. It is so obvious it is often skipped over and/or presumed. As Peter discovers, this is a mistake. Matthew is stressing the importance of the question for his own Church: *Who is Jesus for me? Who is Jesus for the faith communities of the Church?* My answer to the question is not going to be good enough (e.g. Peter). I need to balance my own thoughts and feelings with those of fellow believers and with what Jesus himself has revealed to us. Here are other parts of this question: how is my answer reflected in the way I live? In what ways does my answer shape how I live, speak and act? How do these things reveal my inner Christ?

## **I want Jesus to be what I think he ought to be for me**

Here is the first issue Matthew raises. The Jews had a clear understanding of what the Messiah was going to do when he arrived. They thought they knew his origins, his destination, his role, his methodology and so on. For all of their piety they ended up having absolutely no idea as to how God was in fact working and acting all around them. They could not see in Jesus the divine hand of their Heavenly Father. Why not? Because Jesus came from Nazareth. He was the son of a carpenter and his friends were fishermen, sinners, tax collectors, pagans and women. He seemed to be soft on the traditions of the Pharisees and even claimed to be the Son of God. None of these computed for the Jews.

Surprisingly, Peter was no different (recorded in the seven verses after the present story). He had been following Jesus around and they had lived in the most intimate of conditions along with the other disciples. He knew Jesus' teachings, had a ringside seat when the miracles were performed and yet was not prepared to accept Jesus' teaching on the need for him to go to the cross for the salvation of all. He was prepared to accept Jesus as *the Messiah* and the *Son of God* as long as he carried out his messianic ministry in ways that Peter could understand and accept. For Matthew, this must have been a problem in his own Church. It is so easy to create a comfortable Jesus, a Messiah who will accept just about anything we do and a Son of God whose teachings we can bend, water down, compromise or ignore without any repercussions.

### **The gates of Hell will never stand against the Gospel lived faithfully**

Because Peter was able to profess a faith in Jesus as *The Christ* and *The Son of God* Jesus promised him a unique place within the saving plans of God. We know the weaknesses of Peter, his limitations and his sins and why Jesus would refer to him as *Rock* on whom the future Church would be built is beyond any reasonable reader. And this is the point being made throughout the whole of this section on the Church.

Israel was promised that she would be the arm of God bringing divine justice and blessings and this promise was made when the nation was very much down and out. A mere *remnant* had survived and yet out of this *remnant* of faithful Jews, salvation would flow to the nations. It would flow because God sought to bring all men and women into his Kingdom. God wanted (and wants) all peoples to rejoice in these blessings and those blessings did not depend on having a strong, all-powerful group of people at hand. God will bless the nations.

### **The Church must be always about Christ or it is not Church**

Today's Gospels reading is not as simple as it may at first appear. It offers believers a demanding challenge. We are reminded that believers are to be the hands, the feet, the mouth and the face of God in the world. If people (the world around us, unbelievers and those who once believed but have wandered away) cannot find God alive and at work in the way we live and act then we are failing in the basics of our faith. If our Church is in decline and rejected by the world, then we are fooling ourselves if we think the problem rests with the world. The Gates of Hell will not be able to resist the proclamation of the Good News if it is proclaimed by men and women who live in Christ. The world will successfully resist the missionary work of Christians – individuals and parishes - if Christ is not alive in us; if Christ cannot be seen reaching out through us. Hell will not prevail against Christ-animated living.

In the end, this is all good news for Christians. It is a reminder of the importance of us growing in our Christ-like living. The work of bringing salvation to the world remains with God and so "success" is guaranteed. Our vocation is to be the image and likeness of God.