



Advent Sunday

# THE NEW SHOFAR

**Advent Sunday - assessing our ministry as leaven and mustard seeds in the world.**

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

## **What is it we want from God? - Isaiah 63:15-64:12**

The psalmist, reflecting on all the destruction handed out by the Babylonians and Assyrians - the destruction of the City of Jerusalem and the Temple, the exile of the people, the influx of aliens and pagan gods and the loss of the land – and are asking *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!* When we are up to our eyeballs in crises who wants a God who sits up in heaven “ruling over all things”? As one person asked me at a recent funeral of a child: *Where is God when you need a God?*

### **The seed – small, unlikely and potent**

The previous chapter in Matthew illustrates the opposition facing Jesus in his ministry. The institutional leaders of Judaism could not tolerate this alternative view of God and the divine means of salvation. Why should Israel listen to this itinerant upstart preacher when they had the Temple, the Law, the priests, Pharisees and their multitudinous traditions? In the face of such persecution, the answer Jesus gives is simple and clear: *his mission is from his Father in heaven and therefore this little ministry will be gloriously vindicated.* There is a common image in both parables – the smallness of the agent for change. The mustard seed is very small, but it has within it an almost endless potential for growth. They exist to grow. The only reason a tiny mustard seed does not become a “mighty tree” is that it does not find itself in the right combination of soil, water, air and light. The problem is not the seed but its environment.

*What would our answer to Israel's question sound like? How do we give a helpful, comforting and truthful answer to the man at the funeral? As many a saint has noted, we (believers) are God's eyes, ears, mouth, heart, hands and feet in the world. How might this assist us in answering those questions?*

### **Christ's ironclad guarantee: What began minutely ends massively.**

In the *Parable of the Leaven*, the amount of bread produced is enormously large, impossibly large. What began minutely ends massively. It is said it could feed forty people, three meals a day for several days (Bruner). The point Jesus is making is not that the whole of the world will be converted by the preaching of the Good News or by the witness of believers. The point is that the Kingdom faithfully lived will bubble up within the world until it can offer to feed the hunger of those who come and eat. Believers are not the yeast, they are the bearers of the yeast, the ones who mix the yeast into the world.

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Doing little things faithfully and fully is the way of the Kingdom. Individual believers (parishes) do not have to go out and convert the world, preach the Gospels on street corners or go sell all they have and head overseas as missionaries. It is not about having comprehensive all-encompassing pastoral programmes or evangelism programmes. They **DO** have to live the Gospel fully and completely in every aspect of their daily lives. It is when individuals live as Christ-like witnesses that the Kingdom spreads to the *ends of the earth*. This is not because of ourselves but because of the power of Christ at work in all we are doing.

### **The Church as *Fruit of the Kingdom***

*One way of injecting the leaven into the world is through our involvement with women, children, the weak, ill, aged, refugees, addicts, homeless, all the needy.*

*What ways can we as individual believers and faith community more effectively sow the seed of faith (leaven) in our worlds?*

The Church is often said to be the *first fruits of the Kingdom* (it is not the Kingdom). This is a good way of expressing this reality because it reminds us of how the Kingdom grows the Church, that the Church grows, spreads and becomes live only when it emerges from Kingdom proclamation, when Christians live and give witness to God's rule in their lives. It is all about the inner means of growth, the latent and hidden power behind all growth – God and less about the individual missionaries and faith communities. ***But note:*** This does not entitle individuals or parishes to sit back and let God get on with things. Another

parable reminds us that a sower (all disciples of Christ) needs to be going out (and this means continuing to go out) and casting (and continuing to cast) the seeds into the world. We need to engage in ongoing renewal, ongoing evaluation and to take up programmes of mission and spirituality. All of this will fail unless Christ is at the heart of who we are and what we do.

When it comes to Church size does not matter. A small faith community of six people is no less a Church than one of those enormous mega-churches with thousands in attendance. What does matter is what believers are doing with their baptismal talents. It is ***not*** about Sunday gathering, the singing of hymns or the saying of prayers. It ***is*** about the production of fruit. This is what ***makes*** Church, the living out of a Christ-like presence in the world in which we are living, the proclaiming of the Gospel by the way we speak and act in the midst of others.

***Advent:*** We begin a new season of the Church's year today and in so doing bring one year to an end and prepare for the new year as it opens up for us. It is the perfect time for ***looking back*** – how have we lived as Christ's Disciples this year? Our failures? Our strong points in mission and ministry? Where do we need to say "sorry" and from whom do we need to seek forgiveness? It is also a time for ***looking forward*** – What are our *growth-in-discipleship* goals? What are our Gospel priorities for 2018? What spiritual advances can I make in my own life?

***The reason for the season?*** There are two parts to Advent. **The first** is our reflections on our preparations for the Coming of the Lord at the End of time - the *Parousia*. **The second** is our preparation for the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas and what that event demands of our lives as his disciples. Both have elements of the need to repent, to renew and to grow. For both reasons for the season, constant action is required: *what am I/we going to do?*