



THE NEW SHOFAR

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There is no guaranteed right to have a faith community existing in any one place. It is a calling with costs.

the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you

These are indeed tough words coming from the lips of Jesus, words that were directed towards the spiritual leaders of the nation, men who prided themselves on being righteous and close to God. They kept the Law and were fastidious about all the traditional “extras”, those rituals that were not a part of the Law of Moses but had been a part of Jewish liturgical customs from time immemorial. It fits in well with a similar message given to Israel in today’s reading from Ezekiel...*When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it.* But, what had gone wrong? Why are these religious hard-liners suddenly on the receiving end of the Lord’s tongue lashing?

Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is unfair.’ - Ezekiel

Full marks to the people of Israel when they respond to the tough demands being made by the Lord. What they are really saying is *it’s not my fault God, you ask too much and we are doing our best!* The prophet wrote his oracles in the years leading up to the Babylonian invasion and the exile of the people to the *rivers of Babylon*. In it the prophet is trying to reveal to the people the reasons behind their suffering and loss. They were asking what had gone wrong with God. They were the Chosen People and the land had been given to them as a sign of the Covenant the Lord God had made with them. But now the land was gone. The nation had been destroyed, the Temple pulled down and burned to the ground. Is the covenant finished? Has God truly abandoned his people and taken the land from them?

Ezekiel goes to great lengths to remind the people of the faithfulness of their God. They have gone into decline and are most certainly suffering terribly at the hands of their enemies but God has not abandoned them completely. They are enduring the consequences of their own stubbornness, arrogance, laziness and pride. But all is not lost. Israel can be great again but only if they accept God as the source of that greatness. In order to do that, they needed to *cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!* The prophet understands *a new heart and a new spirit* to mean the people need to sit back and reflect upon what it means to be a person of faith, to prioritize God over all else. If they obeyed God and lived according to the covenant, all would be well. They would not be overwhelmed by the political and military disturbances of the time. They were destroying themselves and tearing down the nation itself *by their own sins*. God did not really have to do anything about punishing them. They were the architects of their own demise. As they brought their suffering upon themselves, so too their way out of the hole they had dug rested in their own hands. *Repent and return to the Lord God.*

Today's Gospel follows on from Palm Sunday

Matthew has located today's reading just after the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It is thus associated with his final messages to the disciples before his crucifixion. It is very much a Church focussed teaching and a direct warning for all future followers of Christ. Matthew was himself writing at a time when the Church was going through its early periods of persecution, martyrdom and expulsion from the synagogues and Temple. It was a time when those first disciples would have been wondering whether it is best to keep quiet about their beliefs, to not speak out against wrongdoing and become *phantom Christians*.

This is where the warning of Jesus comes in. He points to *the chief priests and the elders of the people* and holds them up as examples of what could go wrong. These were not in any way wicked men. They were well respected by the broader Jewish community and were models of what it meant to be a perfect Jew. To attract this kind of condemnation from Jesus, their sins must have been manifold - but what had they done wrong? Their sins were sins of omission more than sinful deeds. They kept the Law and did not do lots of bad things. But they failed to do the good things God was demanding of them.

The Gospels all have narratives about the poor being ignored, abused, mocked, persecuted and even allowed to die and in Matthew's Gospel this failure to act is the greatest of sins. The Church will fail when it neglects a single one of God's needy children. How does the Lord put it... *Whatever you failed to do to one of these the least of my children, you failed to do to me*. Jesus could not have been any clearer. As it was with Israel at the time of Ezekiel and with the Hebrew people after the Resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Church runs the risk of being torn apart, going into terminal decline and being abandoned by the world. God can and will – and is at the present time in many places across the West – allow the Church to lose all it has if it fails to live as God called it to be in the world. There is no guarantee of a thriving parish community or a strong national or universal Church. Jesus had proclaimed he can and will work wherever just two or three gather together in his name and he will be there in the midst of them. He needs nothing more for the work of the Kingdom to continue and spread.

In what ways are we distinctively and faithfully Christ-in-the-world?

Our world today throws up an over-abundance of God's children crying out to heaven for love, compassion, charity and a gentle and caring welcome. If we tune these people out of our lives and concentrate instead on issues, challenges and problems of our own making, then we will most surely suffer the fate of the biblical Jews. At this time, we need to be asking ourselves some fundamental Christ-centred questions: E.G. *Where do the Rohingya people find a place in the priorities of our faith community? How often have we met to pray for them and/or respond to their cries for help? In what ways are we reaching out to the suffering people of Yemen where 300,000 suspected cases of cholera are bringing untold suffering to the people? How concerned are we about the 7 million declared to be medically starving? I could add the many refugees seeking to find a home here or somewhere they can have peace and security?*

Like the Jews at the time of Ezekiel we have the answers to these kinds of questions: *Its politics Lord. Its national priorities first Lord*. We do not have many resources ourselves and we need to fix our own needs first – don't we? We busy at the moment with a same sex marriage question. We have signs on our notice boards and preach sermons, etc, etc. Isn't that enough? I have a feeling that God requires much of those who bear the name Christian.