



Easter 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

Where you there when they crucified our Messiah?

Acts 3:13-19 - Luke 24:35-48

Who killed the Messiah? Why did they kill him?

Over the centuries, there has much comment about the anti-Semitic nature of the New Testament. This is based on they way the writers speak in harsh terms about “the Jews”. They so easily come across to modern readers in particular as being rampant hypocrites, self-righteous, puritanical and fanatical in matters relating to God and the Scriptures. John’s Gospel in particular seems to ram home the reality that it was “the Jews” who crucified Jesus of Nazareth. The reality is, Jesus was not crucified by the Jews. It was the Romans who executed him as a trouble maker and a possible political agitator.

But what was the role of “the Jews” in the crucifixion?

The point the New Testament writers were making was how there were problems within Judaism as a religious movement, as an institution. This is what our writers mean by “the Jews”. It was institutional Judaism that was failing, a Judaism represented by the Pharisees, Sadducees, the priests and the lawyers. To be fair, most of those men strived for holiness, a holiness secured through a strict observance of the Law of Moses and the traditions of the elders. The purity and holiness pursued by these men was the level of holiness they demanded of every Jewish person. These men would never have willingly handed over their Messiah to such an horrendous death at the hands of Gentiles. Their religious life was all about tradition, about what God had said in the past through the prophets and the holy men and women of Israel. When the Messiah came they would most certainly discern who he was and would listen to his preaching and teaching and obey his every command. Wouldn’t they?

Beware of the evil world all around us!

One of the major problems for Judaism was its view of the world. They were surrounded by evil nations and so they were forced to see the world in terms of “them” and “us”. “They” were evil and “we Jews” were righteous, pure and loved by God. But there was a deep seated problem for them. They had no way of finding forgiveness for their sins. There was the Day of Atonement when sins were transferred to a goat, but they quickly sinned again and had to wait until the next year’s celebrations. For a year they had to hope God was in a generous mood when they died! They tried to minimize the harm by increasing the laws, the prohibitions and the demands in areas of purity, penance and prayer. Earning the love of God had become a massive struggle and few ended up even close. This also helps us understand why Judaism was never a religion of proselytizing. They were happy for people to come to them seeking some kind of life under God, but few were ever fully accepted and those who did not come to them deserved to rot in the darkness of Hades for eternity.

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The Judaism we find in the New Testament writings was never going to find the Messiah when he appeared in their midst. They were too busy looking inwards, looking for ways of tweaking what they were already doing and just hope the Messiah would arrive with lights and bells.

The Disciples on the way to Emmaus – their message from Acts

In our reading from Acts, Luke is fleshing out the kind of things Jesus would have said to those men on the road to Emmaus. He taught them how the blessings and promises that were made to Israel's patriarchs are available to them, now, through Jesus Christ the Messiah of Israel, the very Messiah they had rejected. But this forgiveness and new life was not without its own challenges. They needed to *repent* and turn to *Jesus Christ whom you crucified*. With this thinking as a background, Peter carried out his curing of the man who had been crippled from birth.

The people wrongly think the Apostle is some kind of magician and so, as he did in his Pentecost speech, he begins with correcting a miscomprehension on the part of the crowd. In both Luke's Gospel and here in Acts, *power* is associated with miracles and signs but this *power* comes from God and not from his agents, no matter how holy or pious they may be. It is the traditional God of Israel behind this miracle and Peter conveys this message by using one of the most common ways of speaking of God – *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*. This is the *God of our Fathers*, language carefully chosen as the same words appear in the account of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. This is the same God who has now intervened in support of Jesus and is the God who is worshipped by the Jews. Importantly, there is a continuity between Israel of old and this new Christian community gathering in the name of Jesus.

But Israel sins, worse, she refuses to contemplate repentance

Peter then goes on to accuse them of a great sin. The accusation is that the Jews rejected Jesus and in rejecting him they were rejecting him as *the Holy and Upright/Righteous One*. The word *holy* is found across the Hebrew scriptures in speaking of God and when used here with the title *righteous one* Peter is presenting Jesus to the Jerusalemites as being the One sent by God to be his *servant* in the world. He brought the people *new life*. Jesus as the *Holy and Righteous One* highlights the contrast in the way the Jews treated him – *(you) begged that a murderer be released to you*. The leaders of the Jews had been sent the *Holy and Righteous One* from God and yet they rejected him, choosing instead a murderer! Peter's language is blunt and shocking – *you killed* the author of *life*.

Once more we have the contrasts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. But all is not lost as Peter now gives them a gesture of understanding: They acted in ignorance and did not really know what it was they were doing. If they had known, *they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*. It is as if he is saying they have a kind of excuse for their first rejection of Jesus (ignorance) but now this new generation of Jews is being offered another opportunity. They are now being told the truth and therefore have no reason for making a second rejection. This is a powerful statement by Peter. He tells these Jews how their merciful God will forgive them for all they had done to the Messiah he had sent to them. God is granting them *respite, a breathing space* – a time to repent of their sins. All is thus not lost to them. This the breathing space is offered in order that Israel may have time to remember her sins and repent. This is the nature of their merciful God.

And so, Luke challenges Christians today: Have we seen the Messiah sent to us by God? Are we seeing that same Messiah at work in the world all around us and are we responding in a way appropriate to our baptismal calling by repenting? Where do I find that Messiah and importantly,

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what is he asking/demanding of us? *And here is the tough part:* or, are we a lot like the leaders of Judaism in the time of Jesus, committed to faith in God but unable to hear that same divine voice or see that divine presence when God is calling us to reach out and engage with his needy children?

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