



**Sunday Lent 5**

# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

**Lord have mercy on me a sinner!**

**As we judge others so God will judge us**

## ***God is doing new things in every generations***

The technical phrase given to today's reading from Isaiah classifies it as a *proclamations of salvation*. It is a declaration regarding the very nature of God in the divine dealings with men and women. In declaring this insight into God, the prophet takes the people back to the great saving act of their history – the Exodus and in particular, the act of liberation with the parting of the Red Sea.

There are great images at work here...Yahweh who *creates* a way through the sea and Yahweh who *destroys* the Egyptians and *saves* the Hebrews. This is God as *creator* and God as *saviour*. For the prophet, these are the *former things*. This is why Isaiah's uses the revealed Name of God – YAHWEH. This name has been used in our readings throughout Lent as a reminder that the God who *saves* is the very same God who *created*, who continues to create. Hence this reassurance to those Jews in exile in Babylon. *God-with-you* there in Babylon is there with all the power of creation.

This *God-who-saves*, saves for a purpose and they can rest assured that the purpose will be achieved for nothing can frustrate the saving plans of God for creation. These *former things* would also bring to mind the prophecies of first Isaiah – the harsh judgment on Jerusalem which was the major theme of Isaiah 1-19. They were now living that judgment as exiles in Babylon. The message here though, is how that harsh judgment was not the final word. God is now *doing new things*. God did not just do wonderful things in the past. That same power of God from before is at work in the present as well. **Here is the question**: Can we perceive that divine saving work?

***This point should be noted.*** For Israel, the great acts of God in the past – creation and salvation – were stupendous. Impossible to overstate in their majestic display of divine, love, power and mercy. But this is what Isaiah is promising now: For all of their greatness, those acts will fade away when compared to this *new thing* God is doing. What is this *new thing*? God is going to *make a way through the wilderness*. If that is not spectacular enough, God is also going to make *rivers flow in the desert*. Of course, that is a metaphor, one we need to ponder, one over which we need to meditate.

This is an insight into the very nature of God. Our God leads people through the “wildernesses” of life, freeing us from slavery of every kind and taking us by the hand to bring us into a new life of freedom, a land of “milk and honey”.

It is at this point Isaiah hones in on the religious faith of Israel. They had spent far too much on performance, on rituals, creeds and liturgies. They had placed much energy in to protecting what they had, refining it and celebrating it. So much so they had lost the idea of God *doing new things* for them, in them. They thought how anything God is going to be doing in their own time was going to be very much in line with what God had been doing in the past, up until the present moment. That made them blind to the God who is doing new things.

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## ***In Jesus the saving love and mercy of God is opened up to all***

This narrative was added to John's Gospel because it illustrates, through the use of powerful images, the core of the ministry of Jesus. It sets in contrast the differences between the way God looks on his children, sinners and saints alike, and the way the people of the world (including ourselves), can rush to a harsh judgment, the kind of judgment we would not like directed towards us by others. It is important to keep in mind the images the story is painting:

***This desperate woman*** was caught *in the very act of adultery*. Thus, we can add to her plight a significant level of pain and embarrassment. She would have been dragged to the place of execution – outside of the gates - and would have been filthy, with clothing torn or perhaps gone; humiliated by the abuse of the mob and probably pelted with all kinds of rubbish. She was very much alone and vulnerable. This is the first picture, a frightened woman surrounded by a hyped-up mob looking for blood. From where does help come for such needy sinners?

Into this comes Jesus, ***the scribes and the Pharisees***. These Pharisees, as wise teachers of the Law (all men), see the woman as a sinner deserving an horrendous death, a public execution by stoning. Her whole life as a person and her relationship with God is measured and summed up in terms of a single act. She is, in their eyes, nothing more than what she had done. These righteous judges had no consideration for any other possibilities that might bring about some level of compassion and perhaps an exemption from the death penalty. Was she being abused? Was she raped? Where was her husband? Family? Circumstances? Was it a one-off moment of weakness, led astray for very human albeit sinful reasons? Was she truly repentant? No. She was what she did and what she did was wicked and sinful. The law said stoning and stoning it must be in order to placate God and to ensure the covenant was not broken. Righteousness at work!

***Then there is Jesus***. What he sees is a woman. A daughter of God His Father. The very kind of person to whom he had been sent by God his Merciful Father. She was one of the *sick* who stands in need of the *healing* God alone can bring. In no way does Jesus deny her sin. She is a woman clearly guilty of adultery – but she is more than an adulterer. He sees her through God's eyes. Here is a woman who is being humiliated and is suffering greatly, a suffering enhanced by the very proximate horror of death by stoning. With no chance of forgiveness to be found from those around her, from where does her liberation and new life come? Is this the ***new thing*** of which Isaiah wrote? Is this the ***new Exodus*** on offer to all who find themselves struggling with sin, failure, misunderstandings, rejection and hatred? ***Emphatically YES says John!***

It is important to understand how Jesus ***does not*** excuse her, not does he in any way seek to downplay the wickedness of what she has done. He ***does*** present to her the love His Father has for her and ***does*** reveal the Father's desire for her to live in His divine presence now and forever. He ***does*** forgive her sins. He ***does*** commend her to a transformation of life (Shub). In the end, John makes it clear how Jesus has not come to judge ***but*** to save ***and*** to bring the children of God into a new and eternal life ***through*** uniting themselves with him, imitating his way ***and*** by sharing with others the gift of love, mercy and life he has shared with them.

***This is something*** the world around us cannot offer, a promise of a new life, a new world, a new way of living with others and with ourselves. The lens through which God now views us is the lens of the Cross of Christ. We are always much more than we do or fail to do.

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