



## Easter 2

# THE NEW SHOFAR

Faith grows in martyr's blood

but they never stopped preaching the Good News

*Acts 6:42... And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.*

One of the great theologians of the early Church was a man from the Church of North Africa by the name **Tertullian** (160 A.D. – 220 A.D) and when preaching about the realities of the Church his own time noted the way the Church grew rapidly and reached out into just about every level of the society of the day, despite ongoing persecution, exile and martyrdom. These attempts to silence the Church and to write it off as an irrelevant, annoying and primitive sect failed miserably. It seemed the more Christians were crushed and isolated, the stronger they grew in their dependence of God for hope. A famous quotation normally attributed to him was *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith* though his actual words were *we grow just as much as we are mown down by you, the seed is the blood of the Christians*. They grew in their lives of prayer, in their commitment to the Scriptures, the frequency of their sacramental celebrations and their faithfulness to the *teachings of the apostles*. On top of all of that, they expanded their works of charity and reached out in love and forgiveness to those who were persecuting them. It really is no wonder the world was forced to sit back and take a little more notice of the Gospel. In their dying to self the Spirit driven Church of God emerged and flourished.

The lectionary limits today's reading from Acts to verse 41 but no student of the Bible would leave out the verse I have reproduced above. It is there to show the contrast between the Church and her opponents in the world. While the Sanhedrin is sitting in their meetings plotting against the Apostles and the other followers of Jesus, while they are holding a court aimed at destroying the sect once and for all, what the Church was doing is set down in verse forty-two. Their ministries *never stopped*. Their focus was not the threats from outside of her ranks. Their focus was on Jesus who had died, risen from the grave and ascended into heaven where he now reigns at God's right hand.

### *The world, its parliaments and leaders can and do at times get it wrong*

Once again Luke makes the situation for Christians abundantly clear – Christians obey God and not humans. They obey even when there are personal costs incurred for their disobedience and non-compliance. We have seen this all too clearly over the last couple of decades with both Islam and Christianity. While in the West we have made a deity of our theories on the value of democracy, men and women of the Book begin with God and what it is God is demanding of them. While most governments strive to feed secular philosophies into their laws and expectations and exclude the sacred, the followers of Jesus Christ do not accept such a division. For followers of the Messiah, the world and everything in it *belongs to God* and while we must *give unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar*, not everything Caesar demands is his by right to demand.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

[anathoth.hough@gmail.com](mailto:anathoth.hough@gmail.com) - [www.houghongod.com](http://www.houghongod.com)

Much of this is going to come down to the way we read and understand the Bible and Christians, Muslims and Jews are all going to approach their sacred texts in differing ways. Even among Christians, the way the Bible is read and applied in Sydney is going to be very different to the way it is understood in the liberal Anglican churches of leafy Melbourne or Adelaide where malleability is often the guiding principle. Faithfulness to biblical Truth is fundamental to our life as believers, just as faithfulness was fundamental for the survival of the fledgling Church.

### ***What do Luke and John offer us?***

Both our evangelists today reinforce a fundamental message, one too often compromised and obscured by the public face of institutional Christianity today. Luke and John proclaim Christ crucified, Jesus the Messiah sent by His Heavenly Father, the very same God who created, who called Abraham, led Israel out of the desert and settled the Hebrew people into the land of Canaan. This is the God Peter obeys and it is the divine revelation that guides all he says, thinks and does in the world. Nothing and no one has the right or authority to change any of what God has revealed to us in his Son. No one inside of the Church and not one opposing it from the outside. It is this losing sight of the Spirit working within the Body of Christ that leads us our crumbling away.

Luke shows this by contrasting the two ways of acting: (a) Following their own laws, the Sanhedrin nailed the Son of Man to the cross, executed him. (b) God responded by raising from the dead the One whom they had killed. A powerful statement highlighting how passion, commitment, zeal for the Law and long running traditions held by those in power are not necessarily the same as obeying God. Time needs to be invested in pausing, in meditating on the Word; in prayer, fasting and engagement with others in exploring the will of God. Disciples cannot work on the presumption they are doing the will of God at all times (e.g. the Sanhedrin) . God is often the God-or-surprises.

### ***God focussed, Jesus modelled, Spirit led - the only Way to live***

John's Gospel eloquently illustrates the dangers of going off on our own, even when our intentions are good. Clearly confused and anxious over the numerous appearances of Jesus and uncertain of what it all means for himself and the other disciples, Peter announces he is going fishing. This is the very occupation he followed before he was called and now he goes back to it. But he catches nothing. This is a key point. For all of his skill, ability and experience, he catches nothing.

Then into the narrative comes Jesus – though Peter does not recognise him at first. The Lord tells Peter to throw out his net into the exact same place in which he had fished all night, into the place where he caught not a single fish. This time, obeying Christ, his nets are filled to breaking point. John's message could not be clearer.

The Bible reminds us how we were created by God as a part of the divine plan and whenever we live in accordance with the divine plan, we find life filled with the good things of creation. Our nets are full. When we live according to God; a way of life modelled for us by Jesus; a life for which we are empowered by the Holy Spirit we experience what it is to be fully human and we collaborate in the building of the Kingdom of God on this earth. In this collaboration we find the kind of peace and joy for which others can only dream. Choosing this way of living will inevitably bring us into conflict with the world of the "Caesars" who see creation in different ways, through *god-less* eyes.

Most would say our Church is in decline and our days are limited. In this post-Easter period, our Easter readings should instead be leading us to see the hand of God at work in trimming us down, in allowing our failures in the past to bring us to a ***return to the basics*** of our apostolic faith that we

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may address the grave challenges facing Christians today. A tepid faith will not grow the Church. It is in our self-sacrificing lives, for *the seed of the future Church is the blood of the Christians*

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