



# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

**A new decade = what is going to be renewed?**

**2020 challenge: a new decade for Evangelism**

**January 19th**

## ***The greatest threat to the Church is Christians***

Winston Churchill, in his history of the second world war made a significant observation when talking about events leading up to the outbreak of that terrible event: *the malice of the wicked is reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous*. There is a further piece of wisdom on this same theme. It comes from Edmund Burke (though its true origins remain debated): *For bad men to accomplish their purposes it is only necessary that good men do nothing*.

This is the kind of theme Isaiah was using nearly two thousand years earlier when he was proclaiming the word of the Lord to those Jews who were struggling under Babylonian oppression. He was essentially saying to them: *you are in this mess because of your failures*. They had allowed deceptive priests and false prophets to shake their trust in the Lord their God. When disaster seemed to be immanent, they should have trusted in the God who had led them out of Egypt and located them in the Promised Land of Canaan. Instead, they turned to the ways of the world around them, seeking solutions in politics, economics, philosophies and the mores of the pagan world.

## ***We are arrows in God's quiver***

If we go back into the Bible and find the ways in which God speaks of Israel in explaining the reason for them being chosen, the images are all ones of movement and action. Look at Isaiah in today's reading. Israel is described as being *a sharp sword in the hand of God* and like *a polished arrow hidden in God's quiver*. A sharp sword and a polished arrow. The sword is already in the hand of God and when it is to be used, it will be God who is using Israel. God is the power, strength and wisdom behind the sword-play. Israel/the sword remain but instruments in the divine plan.

The same goes for the arrow. It is polished and so faster than normal. It is already in the quiver of God, ready for the divine hand to reach up, place it in the bow and sent it on its way to the chosen target. We know it will reach its mark because the marksman is God.

## ***Jerusalem is destroyed because of Jewish unfaithfulness***

The prophets all agree on one thing when it comes to the Babylonian exile. It happened not because of the strength of the mighty Babylonian invaders. It happened because not enough of the Jewish people stood up for the Covenant when it was being undermined by apostates – those who professed faithfulness to the Laws of God but who in fact surrendered to the pressures from the world and turned away from the Covenant as set down by God. They compromised. They thought they had better ways than God to find the milk and honey they had been promised. They remained silent in

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the face of falsehoods, when pagan gods were included in worship and sacrifice and when the people became more like the Canaanites around them than the people led out of slavery by Yahweh. They chose to be swords in the hands of others, arrows in foreign quivers and when the time came to get together and speak out against the compromised priests and the false prophets, they remained silent.

### ***I will give you as a light to the nations***

Out of this broken, sinful, weak and vacillating people is then chosen true servants, people who are going to engage in the *restoration* of Israel, the *raising up* of the Chosen People. From this mob is going to come *servants* of God who will live as *lights to the nations* and bring the Good News of God's loving mercy to the pagans living on the very edge of the earth. Looking at the dregs of what had survived the original invasion, one would be tempted to see this choice of servants to have failure built into it. For Isaiah though, salvation is all about being like a *sword* in God's hand, like an *arrow* in God's quiver. Forget God and they remain nothing but impressive pieces of equipment.

### ***Our glory is to be found in the Christ in us***

One of the powerful insights of St John is the way he saw in the coming of the Messiah the gift from God of a whole new creation. It is in Christ that all things have the opportunity of a return to paradise, to the new Garden of Eden. This Garden is to be partly here on earth, but it is not an earthly garden, one made by human hands. "Paradise" and everything it comes to mean is associated with God, and we can now come close to God by being at one in Jesus. This is why the Baptist declares *I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him*. In Genesis 1 we are told... *the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters*. That was the sign that the creative acts of God were unfolding all around them, an unfolding that will go on until the End.

But where is this paradise in 2020? Our churches are shrinking and dying and morals contrary to the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures rule society. To all accounts, we have become a "godless" nation. We need to ask ourselves: *am I like a sharp sword in God's hand* or have I been blunted by inaction, by remaining silent when a Gospel voice was needed? Am I a *polished arrow in God's quiver* ready and willing to be fired by the heavenly bow into the darkness of the surrounding peoples or am I but a potential arrow? The alternative is that I am, in the words of Burke, a *good person* but one *who remains silent* when a voice is needed urgently.

It is the silence and absence of Christians that allows evil to flourish and when evil flourishes our churches shrink and fail. Gospel faithfulness is then too hard, too challenging and too dangerous and in our silence, the self-indulgent priests and the false prophets prosper. They strip our churches of their Kingdom qualities and fearing that the Word of God may give offense, shape the message to the world rather than shaping the world by the message from God.

### ***A light to the nations...?***

Of course, some may have a more optimistic outlook on the current situation and give examples of where their light is shining. But there is no point in having a light burning in the noontime sun. Nobody needs light at that time. Isaiah and Jesus both speak of having light shining when it is dark, when and where people need the light. There is our challenge That means venturing into the dark places of our world rather than sitting on the outside. Be arrows. Be God's sharp sword in 2020.

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