



Epiphany 6

THE NEW SHOFAR

But I, I say to you...so listen!

The only way to Life is the Way of Christ

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live in the land

This speech from Deuteronomy is a most beautiful composition put together during or just after the exile of Israel into Babylon. It is an attempt by the authors to explain the horrors of the exile: why was this terrible suffering and death allowed to crush the nation and its people? The answer is disarmingly simple: *remain faithful to Yahweh*, the God who brought you out of Egypt, made covenant with you in the desert and led you into this land of milk and honey and you will prosper. Pursue other gods, the gods of the land and neglect the commandments of God and you will perish.

The Exile was understood to be God's working to reform the people. God did not destroy them. That was the work of the Babylonians. What was God's role?... *because they transgressed against me, therefore hid my face from them*. If we read Jeremiah's prophecies coinciding with the Babylonian invasion, we can see how Israel had many opportunities to avoid destruction. They preferred to trust in their own political skills, the armies of their neighbours and bribes to placing their trust in God. It was sheer hubris that dragged them down and God did not stop it.

It is all about the choices we make

The problem with consequences for Israel was that they were not immediately apparent. They sinned and nothing happened. They committed greater sins and again nothing of consequence happened. They concluded – God loves us so much we will not be punished. The God of love is not that kind of God! And so they ended up in chains in Babylon. For the authors, sinning is a bit like filling a bucket. You can keep adding sins up until they fill the bucket and then overflow, flooding the world around them. It may be their sin which is the final sin completing the filling and beginning the overflowing.

In the Bible, we choose sin and God offers grace through repentance

Our reading Deuteronomy reminds us of this truth. We sin because we choose an alternative to the Way of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We were not created to be living in sin and the more we sin the more we tarnish our inner humanity. Living in a manner not in line with God's plan means things will go wrong. But that is never the end, for even in the very act of sinning, as we find ourselves drowning in the mess we make of life, there is the Crucified and Risen Christ, reaching out and offering us a new beginning. Sadly, all too often happens only when, like the people of Israel, we find ourselves "in exile" in a "Babylon" of our own making.

Why did God not save Israel from this suffering? Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all show us the great lengths to which Yahweh went to save them. Time and time again he sent them prophetic utterances, but they would not listen. They maintained their faith in God but preferred to enhance the works of the Almighty with their own intelligence, insights, strengths and finances. This is why the highlight of the reading is the invitation: *choose*. We cannot have a bit of God and a bit

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of a backup from the world. It is God's Way or the way of sin. One leads to life, the other we follow to death.

Thank God hell does not exist! ?

Imagine how scary this teaching of Jesus might be if hell actually did exist! Fortunately for us, modern Western scholarship has all but written hell off as a metaphor, a place that should it exist would be empty (?). Because *God is love* no one would be sent to such a horrible place. ??

So, what does Jesus tell us in today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount. He begins by warning his disciples not to be lured aside by false prophets and erroneous teachings. This is the meaning of the emphatic words: ***but I say to you***. Any teaching not grounded in Jesus is not true. Hades here is not a punishment God inflicts on unfortunate sinners. It is the heritage of those who choose to ignore God and to go their own way. God offers us eternal blessings or eternal cursedness. It is only through the goodness of God that we are made aware of this choice and are given the graces we need to follow the Way of Christ, even though the road is at times narrow and winding.

Jesus turns the world's ways on its head

The problem with law and lawyers is that they can so easily become tied up in the nuances of what is written down in the statutes. There is always a way to find alternatives and compromises. Here Jesus seems to understand this human tendency and warns them of how he looks not at laws broken or kept. What he looks for is a way of life that is being lived out in the world. Or, in His own words, *what is in the heart*, for the Ancients believed it was the heart that directed our actions and our planning.

Hence this teaching: anger is the equivalent of murdering someone in your heart (**1 John 3:15**). How seriously do we take this? If someone is angry, they are violating the Law of God and will be subject to the same judgment as the person who physically kills his or her neighbour. Note how there is no room for compromise in this teaching of Jesus and no exceptions allowed. For Jesus the inner attitude is more important than the outward actions. Sin begins in the heart. Even when this inner darkness manifests itself in what we think are insignificant words or actions, it is still an attitude worthy of judgment for *out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander*. (**15:19**).

The world cannot be transformed by half-hearted discipleship

Calling someone a *fool* seems to be a sin which is not deserving of punishment in hell. However, it is an Aramaic form of insult. It is the saying of something designed to hurt, ridicule, belittle, destroy or slander another person. The list of what it includes could go on, but it is all about our harmful intentions. It is an insult, and in the social setting of the time, to call someone an "idiot" was a major personal attack that destroyed their standing in the community and their own sense of worth. It was a public shaming.

The moment someone uses these things in their dealings with others (or when they include them in gossip about another person), they have already begun to head down the path that ends in physical murder and Gehenna is their final destination! *The fires of Gehenna* were located in the Valley of Hinnom. It was a terrible place, one that was mentioned only with fear and dread. It was the place where human sacrifices were made to the god Molech. In later days it became the rubbish dump for Jerusalem, the place where the refuse was taken to be burned. Those fires would burn day and night and became a metaphor for the eternal punishment that would be meted out to sinners.

The loving Christ does not speak of hell in order to scare us into faithfulness. Nor is it there as a threat. It is always mentioned in the setting of an invitation to collaborate with God in the work of transforming the earth, restoring creation to the state it was in before sin became a reality. Those wishing to bring

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peace, justice and love to world will only achieve these things through following the way of the Sermon. It is not to be written off as idealism. It is the only guaranteed way of finding the promises of God completed.

The invitation today is for us to examine our own lives and commit tomorrow to the Lord, choosing the Way of Christ and not the way of the world, the Way of love and not the way of getting even.