



September 6th

THE NEW SHOFAR

What God has built up

God can allow to be pulled down

Now is the time to address all of God's children

Ezekiel had been commanded, earlier in section not to speak to the people of Jerusalem until the City had been defeated and its people taken off into exile. Hard to imagine this is a message from God! God's saving activity is no longer at work in the world through the Chosen People. The people needed exile to learn repentance. For God, it is essential that Jerusalem come to a violent end. The Temple must be destroyed. The people He had led into the Chosen Land must be dragged off into a pagan land and the land of milk and honey given over to others. **Why?** Because the people had abandoned a life of covenant faithfulness and watered down the Yahweh traditions of their elders, polluting Judaism with the decadence of the nations around them. It is a call to repent.

The Watchmen to the towers

Watch towers were an important part of the defence preparations of nations across the Ancient East. They were scattered across the borders enabling the watchmen to give advanced warning of an approaching army. These warnings could save the nation from enslavement. But there was more to this essential functionary than a military role. The Bible also refers to watchmen in a spiritual sense. God appointed prophets as spiritual watchmen over the souls of His people. They were there to enable the covenant faith to flourish and to grow so that God's name would be known to all peoples everywhere.

The prophets' job as watchmen was fundamental to the integrity of the nation. A compromised, "sleepy" *prophet/watchman* was a danger to Israel. They were silent when they should have been bringing out their shofars and trumpeting warnings to the people. Their spiritual vocation was to bring the loving mercy of God alive in the communities they served. They were themselves to be models of faithfulness, standing up for the Word of God. The divine expectation was that they would be calling out warnings of the dangers of a compromised faith life – even if it cost them their lives (as it did). Their role was to encourage God's people to live faithfully and to warn them of the perils involved in falling away from the Lord and pursuing the "ways of the world". When the wider world has lost contact with God, the watchman's job is even more vital and, even more dangerous for him if he remains faithful. They were there to choose the Way of God rather than their own ways. The world desperately needed lives of faithfulness to open up the God-given possibilities of being fully human through grace.

Being a Watchman is no easy task

Why are *they* judged so harshly in the words of the prophets? Because their vocation was to protect, to nourish, to shepherd and walk with their people on their faith-journey. They were not there to be popular or to milk the opportunities their vocations offered. They were to “reek” of God, oozing God from every pore of their daily activities. But they had chosen the easier pathway and the people *were like sheep without a shepherd*.

As watchmen, the prophets were also called to warn wicked people of the judgment and destruction that would come their way unless they turned from their evil preferences. They were to be beacons of Truth and Life in an environment where the rich prospered, the powerful plundered and hubris reigned unhindered. They were to be at the frontline of bringing God alive in their world. But it was easier to sit back and say nothing.

Ezekiel’s message from God is also a warning to the Church today

Ezekiel is not just speaking to the Hebrew people facing the Babylonian invasion. He speaks to the faithful of every generation, and even more stridently to the leaders of our faith communities today. Where are our watchmen? Where are they proclaiming loudly the Gospel Truth in the face of the lesser “truths”, the deceptive lies built on the sand-foundations of the self? When some seek to allow ways contrary to the Gospel to go unchallenged and even aid its entry into the teachings of the Church, where are our Watchmen? They stand condemned by their silence and their preference for compromise and cultural assimilation rather than standing fast to the Will of God.

The fact that God can announce the end of the Holy City, its Temple, sacrifices, priesthood and her traditions should make us sit up and ponder the Gospel call to repent. The Hebrew people were stunned to silence when the land of Canaan was taken from them and handed over to the pagan Babylonians. The very sign to the nations of the Covenant between Yahweh and His people was reduced to dust. Why? The watchmen failed. They saw no evils and dangers when all around them temptation and subtle inroads of the nations around them were eating away at all that was holy and sacred to them and to their ancestors. They were silent when they should have been making sure they were being heard. They stand condemned then as they stand condemned today. God was not condemning the people of Israel for their faithlessness. They had not heard the warnings the prophets had been preaching. They were not aware they had been led down a godless pathway. The silence of the Watchmen was not their sin.

Our Christian leaders, our Bishops, Priests and Deacons are called to be Watchmen and thus all the warnings of Ezekiel apply to them. In the same way the experience of the destruction of Jerusalem applies to the Church. While the promise of Jesus applies: *the gates of Hell will not prevail against you* – it does not mean the form of local church to which we have become so attached will prevail. God’s saving works will continue whether there is a parish church and parish priest. They are there to assist us in our baptismal vocations as Watchmen of the Kingdom. If they do not assist...then what happened to Jerusalem and the Promised Land stands as a divine warning.