



January 1,3

THE NEW SHOFAR

What God wants is collaborators

Let it be done unto me according to your will

a September 2021 rapture?

I have been amusing myself over Christmas by reading Christian articles on what 2021 might bring us and the kinds of transformations to which we are being called by God. According to one newsletter, the rapture will occur in September 2021 a truth worked out for us on the basis of biblical information. According to these new age prophets, we need to be prepared for we are approaching the Last Times.

2021 a time for Christian Hope

Of course, that is all nonsense. The New Testament teaches us how the end time has already begun. It kicked off with the Incarnation, was re-enforced in the Resurrection and Ascension, unfolds in the light of the Pentecost Spirit and continues until the return of the Son of Man and the beginning of the universal judgment. Apart from a few odd references to the End as a separate event, the focus has always been on what we need to do as we preparation for the End. Not waiting for it.

What we should be doing is living in the chaos and uncertainty of the present world as beacons of hope. It is our faith in a loving, living, all powerful God that activates this hope within our hearts and transforms the way we live.

Ignore the false prophets and unreliable teachings of the world

As Christians we view all men and women in the light of them being created in the image and likeness of God. They are all God's children who have been invited into the Light through the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

But all is not well. There is a dangerous heresy pervading today's Western world. It is the heresy of defining others in terms of the colour of their skin, their gender, their ethnicity; through the lens of LGBTQI+, Black Lives Matter, gender fluidity and a myriad of power struggles people seem to be discovering at every level of life. In this world, we are either oppressors or are being oppressed. According to critical theories, Christians are the most obvious oppressors but all religions are at the source of much of the world's woes. For these heretics there is no hope for the world unless

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the past is left behind. They are people who live being active against everyone who disagrees with them and propose little in the way of a new framework for living.

We bend the knee before the Lord our God alone

Over the last couple of decades, one of our greatest mistakes as a Church has been our search for ways of placating the anger and antagonism of the world around us. The Archbishop of Canterbury has made a commitment to remove many statues from British churches because they may be offensive to some. He also declared the EU to be the greatest dream human beings have realised “for over a thousand years”. A male priest turned up one Sunday morning as a female clergyperson and celebrated the Eucharist in her new identity. This was done with no repercussions from his/her bishop but with great consternation among believers in the pews.

There is now a Bible “translated” with a gender reversal throughout. God is a woman, great figures such as Abraham, Moses, king David and even Jesus are all female. This has been done to illuminate the “true message” of the scriptures. The National Church of Iceland decided it would advertise Sunday schools by using pictures of a bearded Jesus with makeup and breasts wearing a white dress and jumping around erratically under a rainbow. God had become whatever and whoever we wanted Him/Her/It to be. It all comes down to individual expectations.

Here in Australia the trend has been in the same direction. Too many of our Church leaders have abandoned the idea of there being a set of revealed, objective moral laws and norms. These are no longer relevant as they are bound up in cultural expectations and practices that made sense thousands of years ago.

It is almost impossible to speak on matters of human sexuality, gender issues, racial matters and the like in the terms of biblical teaching and Christian traditions because the world has “moved on”. We hear of bishops and priests accepting that God did not just make male and female but a whole range of gender options – according to Google there are somewhere between 33 and 112. Marriage between a male and a female is not the only expression of the will of God for couples in loving sexual relationships. We are all apparently guilty of racism and one person’s truth is as good as any other truth and we must accept their views as they present them.

The foundational belief that has been the strength and comfort of the Church for two thousand years – *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life* – has long been abandoned and Jesus is now mixed with a wide range of alternative “ways” and “truths”. If the world does not accept Biblical and Church traditional teaching, then it is the Bible and Church that needs to change its foundational truths. If the world refuses to accept basic biblical revelation, then we need to change it. Truth is what people want it to be and there are no absolute truths beyond that. As the Beatles sang, *All we need is love. Love is all we need...*

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2021 – a year for returning to biblical faithfulness

In his **Book of Revelation**, one of the core messages St John gives to his fellow believers is an exhortation to return to following what he calls the *traditions of the Apostles*. It is his way of talking of the teachings of Jesus as revealed in the Bible. The Church of his time found itself living in a world dominated by pagan teachings and morality. The Emperor was a god and the only way to advance in that culture was to bow to the ways of the Romans. Offer incense to the national and local gods and you could live and work in peace. Deny the absoluteness of Christ and you would suffer. Refuse to bend the knee before the Emperor and these other gods and life would become incredibly difficult, painful and probably short. Your end would take place before wild animals, gladiators or on the cross.

The temptation then was to maintain a nominal faith, a private belief in Jesus Christ as God, Son and Saviour but to make a public display of accepting what the world was believing, doing and expecting. Better to say nothing, to appear to go along with what everyone else was doing and saying than preach the Gospel and go to a terrible death. It was better to live as an apostate than to die young as a martyr. They were starkly set out options and the Church we have today was born out of the blood of those who chose faithfulness to Christ over acceptance by the world.

St John reminds the churches of the Gospel command to proclaim the Gospel to the *ends of the earth*, to everyone. That is the reason for the calling into existence of the Church in the first place. Christianity is all about bringing the world to God. They are to proclaim that Good News in word but more importantly by the way they live and act. They were not to go out and battle with the world, to take up arms against the pagan occupiers. They were to live in hope that their God, who is God Almighty, would sort out the world while the faithful were getting on with their baptismal responsibilities. By living in faith-driven lives, the Spirit is released.

It is not too late for the Church to renew itself

So what does that mean for our New Year in Christ? One thing I would suggest we need to put on our agendas for 2021 is a Church Revival movement. It need not be in the old Billy Grahame style, but a revival is essential. We do not need a new Church or even a new way of “doing” Church. What we are called to be in this coming year is a Church revived, Church rejuvenated in the Spirit. A Church which is not ashamed of the Gospel.

This means a return to the basics. Not trying to shape our Church today in the way the Church of Paul’s time was structured and operated. No. It is pointless trying to recreate a Church that made sense in the world of 60 A.D. The basics to which we need to return are the basics of our faith. What we believe; the Truths from God that shape who we are and how we live. The Truth about our origins and our destiny.

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The Truth as personified in the person of God's only Son, Jesus of Nazareth who is our Christ, our Messiah, the Saviour and Life-giver for all men and women.

The world needs us to revive our liturgical lives, our prayer lives; reinvigorate the place Bible reading, studying and praying has in our own lives and in the life of our families. Caring for the poor, the frail, the lonely, or as Jesus demands... *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,* ⁴³ *I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you looked after me* must be our priority.

If 2021 is not about placing the Way of Jesus Christ and the demands of the Bible as our number one focus in all planning and activities, then we will continue to decline and become more and more irrelevant to the needy world around us.

With the chaos brought about by the Covid pandemic and associated fears and anxieties, people need a certain rock on which they can build some hope, some comfort. Light is needed and that Light comes from Christ before anything else.

2021 is a post Covid world

One of the realities the Church needs to face has been spelled out for us by Pope Benedict... *She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges.*" This is where we are, especially in this Covid restricted world.

For many Christians around the world, the lectionary celebration for January 1st is that of the Feast of Mary the Mother of God. It is a feast celebrating the divinity of Jesus and its roots are found in heresies denying that Jesus was truly God and truly man. Out of the Council of Ephesus (431) came the definition of Mary as ***Theotokos*** – ***God Bearer***. And what a great title that is! It honours Jesus as the divine Son of God who *pitched his tent among us*. Mary was honoured through being chosen by God to be the one *bearing* Christ for the world and it is this vocation that we take up in our baptismal commitments. It is thus the perfect image for our revival in 2021

Mary became the **Theotokos** in a hostile and brutal world. She was to give birth to God's Son in a society that would eventually crucify him for what he was saying, doing and for who he was. Mary was warned that in saying "Yes" to the angel, she needed to prepare for a sword to pierce her heart. Life was not going to like some peaceful nativity scene on a Christmas card. It would end on Golgotha.

Like few eras before the one we are now entering, we, as God's Body in the world, face enormous threats and challenges. Many have abandoned the faith altogether and there are now more apostates than people in our pews. In this post-Covid world then, what faith resolutions and commitments are we prepared to make for God?

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