



Lent 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

***Israel had hope as long as it was reforming
Our religious life today must always be in transformation***

Chronicles answers the question: Who are we?

Chronicles, written just after the return from exile in Babylon, repeats some accounts of Israel's history – but is very selective in what is retold. Its focus is on the most glorious parts of their history – the time of David and Solomon. There is no mention of the Exodus from Egypt, and the time in the wilderness and the giving of the Torah has only minimal coverage. There are, however, lengthy accounts of the succession to the throne of David by Solomon his son and accounts of the role God had in building the nation to the powerhouse it was. Its focus is on the land, the monarchy and the Temple. Why? Because the people had returned from exile in Babylon to a land that had been destroyed, to Jerusalem a capital city without a Temple and a land occupied by pagan tribes.

They were writing Israel's story to a people who were searching for a reason to hope. It was aimed at encouraging them to have faith in the promise God made to David and reasserted in Solomon. They had to believe the Babylonian experience, along with the poverty, indignities, suffering, wars and famines were not the things that defined them as a people. They were much more than what was going on in their lives at the time. That "much more" was God.

Religious reforms were the cause of Jerusalem's salvation

For the Chronicler, what was of great importance were the religious activities of the people, their obedience to God and the teachings of the prophets and the rejection of idolatry. This is why king Hezekiah plays a prominent role. His first act as king was to gather the priests together and order them to purify the Temple from idolatry and neglect. He then called the whole of Israel in to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover sacrifice. It was a moment when repentance became the core issue for the people. They had to renounce the godless ways of the world around them, and return to covenant faithfulness. Did this work for them? According to the authors it did. When Assyria sought to attack the weakened Israel, they were able to rebuff their every violent incursion...*God saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from Sennacherib king of Assyria.* **Note** the way this victory is expressed: it was God who saved the reformed and renewed Israel and gave them a future in the land as co-workers in His ongoing saving works in the world.

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The Chronicler challenges the faith community: Before they did anything else to secure their future in a post-Babylonian world, the people needed to first of all return to God, reform their religious ways and recommit to the Covenant God had made with them. Then, and only then, would they be able to find a future in the dark world they found themselves after their return from Babylon. It is a message worth taking into our hearts and parish planning as we move closer to Easter.

O give thanks to Yahweh, his steadfast love endures for ever.

Now we can see where the psalm fits into today's readings. Israel had to learn how the steadfast love of God endures, even while they were in Babylon; even when they returned to a devastated land; even while they sought to begin the work of rebuilding and recovering a passion for the way God wanted them to go into the future. Having faith and hope in the steadfast love of God in all things, makes the first step possible.

that whoever believes in him may have eternal life

The image of the snake on the pole from Numbers is a powerful image, one given to us by Christ Himself as a means of understanding His own mission and ministry in the world. That serpent was not the snake from the Garden of Eden. It is a symbol of death. Jesus used it as a way of teaching us that in order for Him to save us, He must become *death* on the cross. What led to the death of the Hebrews in Numbers was their sin, their rebellion against God and their passion for "other" gods. They died because of their sins. Looking at the snake was God's offer of salvation.

Jesus uses that image to teach us the same message. Jesus' death on the cross becomes for us the gateway to grace. "Looking" upon Him on the cross brings an end to death and transforms the grave (imaged in our baptisms) into a step into Life.

Judgment, justice and mercy

Judgment and mercy both originate in God and in the cross of Christ we see both of these gifts at work. There is divine mercy poured out on those who (a) turn to the cross in faith and (b) move into life filled with hope. There is judgment, however, for those who do not take up the *Way of the cross*.

"Look upon", "take up", these are biblical expressions speaking of the way we live in the world. We are not saved by simply *looking upon* the cross of Christ. We are saved by the mercy of God and we access that mercy in and through Christ – through *taking up* Christ and by viewing what we do and say through the lens that is Christ (his example, witness and teachings). Thus, the God who stood behind the image of the snake on the pole saves those who repent.

What we see on the cross are our sins, our infirmities nailed there with the Jesus of Nazareth. But it takes eyes of faith to see in that image a hope for healing, a promise of life within even the darkest of our own "Babylonian" moments.

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