



Easter 5

THE NEW SHOFAR

Because Jesus is one with the Father, those seeking perfection must imitate Him

Church as a sign of contradiction in the world today

One of my favourite stories about Napoleon in an argument with a cardinal. He was boasting that he had the power to destroy the Church. In reply, the cardinal offered this to-the-point insight...*your majesty, we the clergy have done our best to destroy the Church for the last eighteen hundred years. We have not succeeded and neither will you.* The cardinal was Ercole Consalvi. He went on to warn Napoleon that while the Church will most certainly suffer persecution and hardships until the time the Son of Man returns, it will always remain while it lives in Christ, and while Christ lives in Her.

St Hilary of Poitiers (315-367) had offered similar messages of hope for those communities who gather in the name of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. He noted how *it is the peculiar property of the Church that when she is buffeted, she is triumph; when she is assaulted with argument she proves herself in the right; when she is deserted by her supporters, she holds the field.*

The gates of Hell cannot withstand the Church in mission

We could go back through two thousand years of Church history and find similar comments to the ones above, many of them arising out of times of great struggles and threats – both external and internal. In all cases the word *Church* is in capital letters. It means the entire Body of Christ reaching *to the ends of the earth*. It is not primarily the local faith communities. Importantly, it refers to the Church as Jesus commanded it to unfold after his death and resurrection...*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.* This is the Church that Hell cannot resist, defeat or destroy.

This is the Church of Acts. It was a collection of communities *walking in the fear of the Lord*. In today's English that would be translated *living out their lives in awe and respect for the absolute majesty of God*. It was their experience of God in their lives that led to this appreciation of the love, mercy and patience of God, all of which is opened up to them through their relationship with the Risen and Glorious Christ.

This is what led to the *multiplication* of the membership. In Christ they were filled with the *comfort of the Holy Spirit*. Only in Christ. That is what the Rock image reveals to us. Throughout Acts and Revelation, the insistence is on living according to the *faith of the apostles*. Only an uncompromised Christian community is able to overcome Hell's gate, one which lives, teaches and proclaims the faith as handed down by the Apostles, a faith enlivened through fellowship, the scriptures and the sacraments.

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God demands more than just orthodoxy

True and proper belief (orthodoxy) is essential but if the heart remains unconverted then those beliefs will not bring Christ alive either in ourselves or in others. Right belief must flow into right practice. The letter of Second Peter puts this beautifully⁵ *For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,*⁶ *and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,*⁷ *and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.*⁸ *For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* This is what Luke is highlighting in Acts. The Church will only be ineffective and/or unfruitful in the world if it abandons or compromises the *teachings of the apostles*.

Such a Church places a priority on praying, or as St Paul urges, *pray without ceasing*. Prayer is communicating with God but what a regular habit of prayer creates within us is an awareness of the presence of God in all things. The more often we pray, the greater this awareness. Praying makes us aware of being with God, and experiencing God leads to a state of awe and thanksgiving. In turn, as we begin to see how God's will is revealing itself in everything we do throughout the day, then our whole day becomes a prayer as we live responding repeatedly to that divine invitation.

The powerful witness of religious communities

Religious communities are reminders to all Christians that we cannot live faithfully if God is only a part of our lives, a part we keep isolated from everything else we do. They witness to what the New Testament teaches us: either Christ is at the centre of our lives, or the Self and all its idolatries occupies that life transforming place. The uncompromising reality is: with God there is no middle ground.

This is also a part of John's message for our Church today. In order to produce the fruit Jesus expects, we need to reclaim the apostolic faith and renew ourselves before trying to transform the world. We have to live in ways that highlight our distinctiveness rather than isolate ourselves in opposition to the world, or worse, compromise the Truth of God with the social corruption of the secular state.

It is rediscovering our past; in reviving liturgical worship and asceticism; through centering our lives on the Church as the Body of Christ in this place that God will do the building and will guide us in the way forward, just as surely as He guided Israel through the wilderness and on into the Promised Land.

This is where we are being led as our Church moves towards Pentecost. While it is essential to convince the secular culture of the truth of Christ, it is even more important for our communities to tell our own faith stories, to renew our spiritual and moral disciplines. We can only give to the world that which we first of all possess. Hence the urgent need of a focus on daily prayer, Bible reflection and regular sacramental encounters. The fruits of this renewal will enable us to be the salt the world requires.