



Easter 5

THE NEW SHOFAR

***Sing to God a new song: do we have one?
Biblical love is always an action, a verb***

God shows no partiality

What Peter is preaching in our reading from Acts is of great importance for the Church, reminding believers how in Jesus, God reaches out to all peoples, that the covenant of the cross is a gift to every man and woman on the earth – Jews and Gentiles alike. But that is not the only message and there is probably a deeper one that is in greater need of highlighting for today's world.

The Blood of Christ was spilled for everyone, saints and sinners alike. The only requirement is for us to be a human person, someone created in the image and likeness of God. But a misreading of this can lead to major problems for the Church and for humanity. Peter is not saying that *God loves me no matter what I do. I can therefore go on sinning knowing how my sin will not stop the love of God reaching out for me.* The apostle goes on to clarify this. He stresses how in *every nation* it is those people *who fear him and who works righteousness* that are *accepted by God*. Experiencing the impartial love of God comes about only through a mutual loving relationship in Christ, through a mutual self-giving with God. This is then further clarified in the Gospel command... *love one another in the same way I am loving you.*

God's love is not to be limited by human limitations

There is a further element here in the understanding of God's impartiality. God does not just love the righteous, law abiding Christian. No person is ever beyond the love of God (c.f. the parable of the Loving Father and the Prodigal Son). We cannot be so sinful, so wicked, so unworthy as to be unlovable to God. We are never beyond the reach of divine mercy. We may at times feel we are unworthy of such a generous love, and that would be true. However, what God tells us is that in Jesus the Divine Son we are forgiven. In Jesus our Christ we are found to be acceptable. Therein is our hope and the hope of the world. The more we live in Christ and imitate Christ, the more we open ourselves to the freely and generously given love of an impartial God.

Biblical love is always love in action – doing love

In all of John's writings, love is never an abstract construct, an internal concept. It is always a love expressed in action. This is how God loves. His love was made manifest when He sent His son to live among us. As one of us He lived, and as one of us He died. That love continues in the ever-present reality of God at work on the world

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through His faithful followers. This is of great importance. God's love for His children does not depend on our worthiness. It is not as if there were benchmarks to be met before we can find ourselves immersed in divine love. We are never beyond God's reach, never so broken, never so morally dissolute that even God cannot embrace us. Even in such deplorable states, we are embraced, lifted up, surrounded and valued by God. In such a loving embrace we are invited to repent, to be forgiven and to begin again, and if necessary, again and again, and again. It is only a human rejection of that invitation that stops new life from happening. This is our witness.

And here is the really difficult part... *just as God is, so are we to be in and for the world.* The love of God is incarnate in the world through us, is able to be experienced by others through our living out of that love. The love God has for us (as made visible in Jesus) is the love we are to have for others. As Jesus had no limits and reached out to everyone; as Christ embraced the sinner, the leper and the foreigner, so too all in need and on the margins of our Church and society are the very ones to whom we must be reaching out in what Peter might have called Jesus-love. This is what would happen if we were genuine in allowing Jesus to live in us. He would lead us out into the world as God wants us to be in the world. We are core elements of the way God loves today.

The world knows us to be Christians by our love

What made the Christian community stand out in such striking ways within its Jewish and Roman environments was the love believers had one for another and their love for others. If in baptism we are baptised into Christ, then it also means we are baptised into God's love, a love that flows into the world through Jesus the Risen and Reigning Christ. This is not a "love" that is about self-satisfaction. It is a love made real through a dying to self, a love defined in terms of the Cross.

Paul tries to explain this. To the Church in Galatia it is manifested through... *joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...* When he wrote to the Church in Corinth he went even further teaching... *Love is being patient, love is showing kindness. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love is not delighting in evil but rejoicing with the truth. ⁷ It is always protecting, always trusting, always hoping, always persevering.* This is how Paul understood John's teachings of the Lord. It is all initiating works of divine love.

Sing to Yahweh a new song: Psalm 98:1

What is this "new" song we are to sing? This psalm celebrates God as King and was sung as a reminder that God is reigning in and over Israel. The challenge is for us to sing new songs of what God is doing for us today in Christ. Not just for the past acts of God but for the new ongoing engagement of God in our lives. We cannot rest on the "songs" of the past, of our ancestors, but need to add our own songs of what God is doing in our world, in our time, in our own lives and is doing through us.