



**July 17<sup>th</sup>**

# THE NEW SHOFAR

***Jesus offers us what it is we need for our lives to be full and meaningful but often we can be pursuing the wrong means to that end.***

***Nothing is impossible for God***

One of the real challenges for Bible readers today is the need to try, as best we can, to put ourselves back into the cultural setting in which the original teaching was set. Today's gospel is a good example of this challenge. It is a mistake to read into it today's social norms and values. Taking it back to the time of Jesus and to when Luke was writing down his accounts of the teachings, we have an insight into the radical nature of Jesus life and ministry.

At the heart of the narrative is the tradition of honour, a word of significance even across the middle-east today. Familial and social relationships depended on adhering to the requirements of the honour system and tribes could be plunged into wars because of a carelessness in observing the intricacies of these traditions.

***Honour applies to individuals and communities***

The most important elements in Middle Eastern communities are those relating to communities rather than individuals. Unlike here in the West where individual "rights" reign supreme, for the East, individuals were important only in terms of what they contributed to the good of the whole community, or how they brought their families and village communities into disrepute. Whatever a person did and said in a village was evaluated in the light of what it meant for the entire village family. Observers would have been watching every step the sisters made.

Jesus would have been seen as a high-level dignitary, well known around the district and his visit was a precious opportunity for all of them. They wanted his presence among them to bring honour and fame to their tiny little community. Both Mary and Martha would have been acutely aware of the pressure on them. A failure in meeting the demands of honour was not something to contemplate.

***And then along comes Jesus and challenges everything***

As Jesus entered the village he was invited into the house by Martha. The female was the guardian of the house, and it was her duty to ensure all was up to the expectations of the society. You can almost see the older women of the village looking on, anticipating with delight her failures. Almost if Mary was following their script,

Martha went to the cooking area to prepare the initial meal and Mary followed Jesus into family room. But it was not where she should have been. The way to honour Jesus was to do what generations of Jewish women had done before her. It was impossible that she was not aware of those expectations but there must have been something about Jesus that drew her elsewhere. Something so powerful that she was prepared to risk the honour of the entire village and bring dishonour on her entire extended family.

Martha's own love and respect for Jesus was equally passionate. She was, after all honouring him with the welcome given to the most important of visitors. It is not difficult though to imagine the kind of animosity and tension building up in the kitchen as Mary persisted in sitting at his feet. Something more precious, something more honourable was to be found there, something surpassing whatever was being prepared in the kitchen. She was honouring the Lord by sitting with him, sitting there and bringing him nothing less than her whole self. Everything else came second.

### ***Jesus was demanding nothing less than something new***

In the tiny villages of the time, Martha would most likely have heard everything Mary had heard, so being about her business did not mean missing out on the words of Jesus. She missed nothing. She was fulfilling her duties as a faithful Hebrew woman, making the village proud so what was wrong with Jesus? In what way had she chosen the lesser path? The answer to that is the message is what Luke wants us to contemplate today.

It comes down to choices. Martha invited Jesus to her house so presumably she had heard all about his ministry and his teaching. She wanted what he was offering but she was inviting Jesus on her terms, in ways that would not cause her to come into conflict with the expectations of the world around her. He was offering something new. She wanted that new offering but wanted it to unfold within the world in which she was comfortable. She wanted both but that was not what Jesus was offering. She had to make a choice – Jesus now or Jesus never.

### ***Grace or worldly honour – make a choice***

At that time, a person's self-worth was all bound up in the tradition of honour. Social acknowledgement was essential but that could only come about when the village approved of what you were doing. That self-worth came from others and yet there were so many ways in which they could fail to meet their expectations, many ways to fall. It explains why there were so many people living on the fringes, ostracised and shunned. They were "dishonourable" and brought "dishonour" to others.

Mary had chosen the *better path* because she put Jesus first. Her honour and self-worth came from Jesus. She was made in the image and likeness of God and shared

the same humanity Jesus possessed. She needed no other honour. With Jesus at her side, there was nothing the world could offer to surpass that kind of love and honour.