



November 20

# THE NEW SHOFAR

**It profits us not to show forth virtue in words and to then  
destroy truth in deeds (Cyprian)**

*that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out  
before us and fight our battles. 1 Samuel 8:2*

One of the occasions in the Bible in which we find God acting in frustration and disappointment is found in 1 Samuel 8. In that narrative, the people come to Samuel and pressure him to ask God to give them a king (c.960 BC). Why do they want a king? In their words, *that we might be like the other nations* (8:5). Given all God has said to them and done for them, why would God respond in such strong language? The answer to that is found in the call of Abraham... *Now Yahweh said to Abram, 'Go from your country... <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'* God called Abraham and his family after him, to be a sign among the nations of Canaan, a witness to the truth and ways of God. They were to draw those pagans into a living relationship with Yahweh, preach the God of Israel by the way they lived the multitude of blessings that come with such faith in the One True God.

It is a sad thing about faith that it can be so easily undermined when it is limited primarily to creeds, law and worship. Words and worship will convince few to come to faith in the Living God. The Hebrew scriptures from that point in 1 Samuel onward are a record of the dire consequences of compromising on the will of God as revealed in the revealed Scriptures. The more Israel adopted the ways of the Canaanites; the more they lost their distinctiveness and failed to stand out by living according a very different moral code the more they turned their backs on God. This request for a king was their first step on the way to their exile in Babylon (587 BC).

## **God did not call us to be *like the other nations***

Why are we concerned about being *like the "culture" around us*? Given the great deeds through which God has revealed himself down through history and in our own personal lives, why is it we worry about standing out against the movements of the ever-changing philosophies and ethics of *the nations*? More than this, too many of our leaders and scholars seem to take pride in turning away from the ancient traditions and speaking out in favour of these new popular ways. It is not the way evangelism has ever worked. Christians attract others to Christ by living in the way Christ lived. The only gift we have to offer the world, a gift they cannot find elsewhere in the society, is the gift of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Few will accept Christ

through our preaching, our worship or our teaching. What convinces those who are searching for the Truth will find it in our witness.

### **Learning from the ways of our forebears**

It is impossible to draw accurate parallels between the culture of Ancient Rome and Australia in 2022. A fundamental reason for this is the way religion in Rome was unavoidable. It was impossible to live without a relationship with the gods or to live as an atheist. Everywhere they went, every activity in which they were engaged – at home or in the workplace – the gods were involved. To fail to acknowledge these gods through sacrifices and offerings, was to risk punishment on self, family and the community as a whole. One question we could ask in the light of this is: why on earth would Romans seek baptism, with all of the burdens and threats that came with it, when there were gods aplenty with less demanding membership requirements?

In the first two centuries, Christians were a minute group in the Empire with no prospects of growing. And yet grow they did. Scholars of religion speak of the *push* and *pull* phenomena. They ask, what was it in the existing religious options that *pushed* believers to explore new options, and even more confusingly, to choose an option that would cost them dearly. On the other side of this equation, they ask what it was about the Christian movement that was so attractive, that it could *pull* pagans into exploring such a risky religious system.

### **The importance of habitus for the early Church**

**Habitus** refers to the way of life of the believers in Jesus: their actions and reactions based on their convictions about what it means to live in a truly Christian way. Their behaviour posed a threat to a society based on military force and where people were entertained by watching gladiatorial combat. The Christians refused to take up arms or to attend the shows in the local amphitheatre. They rejected infanticide and rescued babies left in the open air to die. They cared for the sick, especially in times of plague. This reflected a commitment to the teachings of Jesus, more particularly, to the revelation of God's will in the Sermon on the Mount. Their quiet resistance to these social pressures both annoyed their neighbours and attracted them.

Their pagan neighbours were unlikely to read the apologetics of the great Christian writers, but they could and did "read" the lives of the believers. The way they lived challenged outsiders to investigate more closely this novel way of faith. Constantine put this poetically: *the Christian challenge is to hymn Christ through my way of life*. But this does not come easily. It is built up on a life of spiritual discipline, beginning with the rigorous and ongoing formation in the matters of prayer, scripture, fasting, worship, and love. It was the Sermon on the Mount that most occupied their time, along with some key texts from the Hebrew Bible...Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4. Justin saw these as reflecting most clearly the new culture emerging with Christianity. This is what made Christianity so attractive. They did not blend in with the wider Roman way of living. They patiently, and openly lived what that new culture offered to all. It was a way of life or it was not Christianity. **Origen**: *Christ delivers his challenges in the lives of his genuine disciples, for their lives cry out God's real truths*.