



### ***Advent 3***

## **THE NEW SHOFAR**

***When we serve the poor we serve Jesus. We must not fail to help our neighbours for it is in them we serve Jesus.***

### ***Preach the Good news to the poor...who are they?***

The starting point for our understanding of “poor” in the Old Testament begins with the Exodus. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt and immediately after the Exodus all were at the mercy of the desert. Under such conditions no sharp class or economic distinctions could develop. *Poverty* in this context meant a life of dependence on God and God alone. It was Yahweh who was leading them, God who was fighting for them and the Lord who made them His very own people. Without this intimate relationship with God they were a nothing people, a mixed collection of individuals with diverse religious traditions, languages, custom and hopes. What made them truly one people was God; and they only came to God when they had faith in Yahweh’s call to freedom and found themselves drawn to God and responding to Him. Being biblically “poor” cannot happen outside of a God context.

The conquest of the Promised Land changed all that. Each Israelite coming out of the Exodus was allocated a hereditary portion of land to every Israelite, and with it a settled life. It also brought contact with the Canaanites who already lived in towns with clear class distinctions and the Hebrew people, *wanting to be like the other nations*, adopted these distinctions. With an eye on the special place the true poor had in His eyes, Yahweh gave specific commands to His people regarding the poor. The poor were not to be exploited or oppressed. In the courts Yahweh stood as protector of the poor and by divine legislation sought social justice for the poor. This status was in terms of their relationship with God. Apart from God, were just destitute, people in need of charity but a different kind of poor.

### ***You must not be like the other nations warns God***

The monarchy brought economic development and prosperity for some, but poverty for others. As the situation of the poor worsened, the prophets took up their cause. Their hunger for land was driving the poor from their inheritance. They were deprived of the very milk and honey promised to them by God. The injustice was so great that the poor are almost equated with God’s people, the true Israel standing apart from those who sought self-satisfaction rather than service of God. Such injustice could not go unpunished.

The situation of the poor often seemed hopeless, leaving them as powerless as they had been in the wilderness. But God had promises He would not forget them. He pities them, loves

them and comforts them. The OT king likewise had a special responsibility to the weak and poor. Anyone who has a concern for the poor is blessed by God and to honour the poor is to honour God.

This point should not be skipped over too rapidly as it says something about the sacredness associated with being human. ***The poor should be seen as an incarnation of God Himself.*** What they do to the poor they do to God, because to be biblically “poor” means to live intertwined with God, a collaborator in the divine plan God has for creation. It is simply not possible to live in the land of milk and honey without God’s guidance, God’s protection and divine loving mercy. These are things the wealth and power of this world can never supply.

### ***The poor are cherished and highly valuable in God’s eyes***

We can point to any number of characters in the bible whose faith we respect, from whom we can learn but who are rich (Job, Abraham, King David, Matthew, Joanna, Lydia). There have always been wealthy Christians, for it was not wealth God saw as the problem and we know **Romans 2:11** clearly states: “*God shows no partiality*”. The difficulty for Christians was the way wealth promotes self-sufficiency and selfishness.

In the NT the usual term for “poor.” is used of beggars and those who are poor in a material sense. This helps us understand what the New Testament writers mean when they say Christ Himself became *poor* (same Greek word) to make others rich. Christ came to us alone, with nothing but His Father’s love to empower him. He knew what it was to be poor, and this helps us understand why the poor are singled out by him as the primary targets for having the good news preached to them. They are aware of their poverty and are open to whatever it is God can offer them.

### ***What God in Jesus has in mind is a transformed world – nothing less***

What God revealed through Isaiah was what Christ was offering to those who had become jaded, tired of pursuing hopes the world was never going to be able to pursue. But to access those blessings (what in the OT was called milk and honey) they need to build lives founded on divine grace, sustained by the God who walked alongside of them, lives guided by the Holy Spirit. In biblical language that means they had to become poor.

The “economy” of this new world was based on self-sacrifice and the currency of this world was love. For this reason, Jesus told the rich young man *to go sell all he had*, for it was only then he could follow after him. This is our Advent three challenge: Are we God’s *anawim*, his poor little ones? How does our way of living mirror self-sacrifice, a turning away from those things in our lives standing between a faithful service of the divine plan and the prioritizing of our own needs and preferences? Can we discern God present within the poor around us or are there people in whose lives and deeds we cannot find God?