



THE NEW SHOFAR

f anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old one has gone, the new has come – 2 Cor 5:17

January 22

Following Jesus because He is the Way, the only Way to Life

Marcionism was a significant heresy of the second century. It grew out of the teachings of Marcion of Sinope, most of which were rejected by the Church as being incompatible with the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of the Apostles. One of those was his rejection of the Old Testament as being authoritative for Christian living. The God of the Hebrew scriptures was not the Father of Jesus. He was a lesser God (Demiurge was the expression he used). Thus, Jesus was in no way the fulfilment of the promises of God made to Israel through her history. This is where he stands in stark contrast to what Matthew is stressing in today's Gospel. But why is this important, especially when so much of the Old Testament seems irrelevant to people in today's world?

The saving works of God began back in Genesis

God began the work of the restoration of creation the moment Adam and Eve sinned. The first divine act? They were clothed. They had tried to fashion their own clothing out of leaves, but God knew those things would not protect them from the “thorns” and “thistles” of life outside of the garden. They were given new protective covering, clothes fashioned by God's own hands. And so it was through the next nine chapters. God marked Cain with a sign that would keep him safe. Noah built an ark and the people of Babel were scattered so they would not do something that would ultimately destroy them. Such is the nature of God. Sin does not repulse Him, build a barrier between us and the divine love and mercy. God is right there even in the moment of our sinning, reaching out and offering us not just a remedy but what we need for a restoration of our true and full humanity.

The most significant moment was the call of Abraham in **Genesis 12:2-3**... *I (God) will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* The movement from here was towards preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, the world's Saviour who would restore the battered humanity to an intimacy with the God they had rejected for arrogant, selfish but empty hopes. Once again, in God's time, through God's initiatives and according to the Divine plan, Eden would be restored, a world over which God reigned. That is the meaning of “blessings” in the promise to Abraham.

A people led by God, fed by God and brought to a land given by God

One of the constant themes found in the Hebrew scriptures is this engagement between God and the people He chose as His own. Yahweh was no distant God, a deity who abandoned Israel in her infidelity and isolated Himself in the heavenly realms until they repented and returned to faithfulness. The divine sleeves were rolled up and He was with them in all things. Nowhere is this more obvious than the story of the Exodus. It is a story of

salvation, liberation and covenant. God's presence was evident in the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day. The people experienced the divine love when they were fed with manna and quail, when water was made available to them and when their enemies were overcome. The only time things that went wrong during the Exodus was when the people chose to go their own way and defied the divine directions. When they wanted to do more than obey, more than follow, they suffered and they died. What did God do? They were forgiven, healed and invited to continue once more.

They were never abandoned; never rejected because of their sin. They were never without God walking by their side. Another image of this would be the Exile in Babylon. The people struggled to understand how God could bring them the healing and life for which they yearned. They were in a strange land, governed by pagans and living under pagan gods. Surely they could not be further from Yahweh? They *hung up their harps* thinking they could not *sing the song of the Lord on alien soil*.

Ezekiel in chapter 10 shows us the divine response. He gives a vision of the throne of God rising up out of the Temple that had been consumed by idolatry and sin and heading east – towards Babylon where His people lived in slavery. God was with His people. Even when they were sinning He was where they were. And, God was not sitting around doing nothing. He was helping them understand their sinfulness, guiding them to a spirit of repentance and preparing them for their journey home. It was what God does. Who God is and how God does the God thing.

Salvation is what God does and who God is

Jesus sums up His God-given mission in simple terms – *Repent, for the Kingdom of the heavens has come near*. The Greek here indicates an action that happened in the past but has abiding results. What Jesus initiated back then continues into the present and beyond into the future. Not only that, but the use of the plural for the “heavens” picks up the Jewish notion of there being three heavens – the first heaven, the earth on which we live, the air around us sustaining us. The second heaven was the heaven of the sun, moon and stars and the third heaven was the heaven where God lived, from which he reigned from the heavenly throne. In all three realms, God is present, is sovereign and is reigning. All of this comes together and becomes a reality in Jesus, the Son of Man in whom all of the hopes and expectations of Israel are fulfilled.

And here we have Matthew's Gospel message. Importantly, it stands at the opening of his writings. What we have in this Jesus is the saving workings of God that have been evident in creation from the very beginnings of God-human relationships. All of the divine realities of the three heavens is now concentrated in this God-made-man, a man sent by God to make real His works of the past.

“Do we want to know about God”, says Matthew, “then come and follow Jesus”. The powerful and loving works of the past are all made real now and forever, but only in Jesus our Saviour. Matthew even helps us understand what “following” means: denial of the self, of self-absorption, prioritising the self and personal agendas. It means “taking up our cross”, accepting and living out our baptismal promises, making something of the gifts woven into our DNA when God knit us together in our mother's wombs. Life can be so different under God's reign but we need to allow Him to be our Sovereign.