



February 12

THE NEW SHOFAR

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... "but do not become like them or live their ways"

Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets?

The answer Jesus gives to this question is unequivocal. He has not come with that goal in mind. He makes this clear by adding how not a single iota or subscript would be removed. Quite the opposite, heaven and earth will pass away before the Law and the prophets are dismissed as being no longer applicable. It is always God's will for all. How counter cultural that is in today's world where there are no absolute moral norms apart from the ones each individual decides is their unchallengeable law.

One of the indications of the widespread application of this is the way we have somehow managed to remove the harsh and destructive reality of sin from Christian living. Any preacher wanting to bring this topic to the minds of the congregants will find himself warned of how "we are sick of hearing about sin all the time". "We want to hear about good things." Given some of the fire, hell and brimstone sermons we have endured in the past, this reaction is understandable but misguided. It was time for a shift to the Good News of love, mercy, grace and liberation from life's burdens, or so they demand.

Today's reading, however, asks us to pause and to wonder if we have gone too far. It would appear we might have thrown sin out with the bathwater of teachings that are counter cultural – what the world will no longer accept. What is a sin today? What does it take for us to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of repentance and divine healing?

Objective moral norms?

Back in the days when I was studying moral philosophy we had many a discussion on the nature of Truth and whether or not there were moral laws that applied to every man and woman created by God. Were there Laws put in place by God that governed all we thought, did and spoke? Back in the wild 70's these were fierce debates with no prisoners taken on both sides of the question, but it was a crucial area of study.

In today's woke world, a person does not have to look any further than their own personal experiences and understandings to determine right from wrong. As long as I am not breaking the civil laws, I am free to do what I like – though sometimes it is necessary to smash down the legal system because it is tweaked to protect the oppressors and those in power rather than deliver a genuine just outcome.

Nor do the once sacrosanct areas of maths and science escape this shift in the nature of truth. These two areas of human endeavour are but puppets in the hands of those who want to maintain control over the ignorant. Thus, men can be women and women can be men and 60+ genders replaced the binary man and woman model. It is all about self-identification, how a person chooses to live with these experiential models of human living then protected by law. We are drawn into living in the fantasy worlds of those who choose

to look no further than themselves in understanding the questions of *why are we here? What is the meaning of human life? From where did we come and where are we going? Is there hope? Is there forgiveness?* It is not going to work!

You have heard it said.....but I say to you

Of course we like to limit this part of the Beatitudes to Jesus addressing the failings of the Pharisaic approach to the Torah but that is a misreading of what Jesus is saying here. The “you have heard it said” is a warning that echoes down through history and will be a warning heard loud and clear until He returns at the end of time.

We live in a world where the new Pharisees and teachers of the Law promote a secular “gospel” at odds with the expectations and demands of God. Our leaders are more cautious around the dangers of sinning against the new “laws”, commandments such as cancel culture, the micro-sins we commit because we are white; the minefield of gender requirements where a misplaced pronoun can find them on the front page of a daily paper. Try standing up and preaching the old fashioned teachings of the apostles, or the Truths according to our traditional scriptures and the preacher will soon discover that there are many new ways of being stoned by the world.

Believe it or not, “love” does not excuse us from obeying the teachings of Jesus and yet it appears to be the most common excuse applied by believers and non-believers alike. The response of our Lord is clear...*Do not even pagans do that?* The standard we follow is different. As Jesus points out at the end of today’s Gospel, the single overreaching divine command is also clear: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* And how do we know what that means? Once again Jesus leaves nothing to the imagination here when he says *But I say to you...* The moral norms that must guide us as men and women of faith (note: these are moral norms that apply to every human person created in the image and likeness of God) are the teaching and witness of Jesus.

Every example of life in the Kingdom of God offered to us in today’s Gospel is unequivocal, universal, unbreakable and absolute. So absolute that Jesus can warn ... *if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.* This is no meek and mild Jesus who will accept anything we do in life. This is a Jesus who pushes us to a way of life far more challenging and difficult than anything the Old Law asked of the people of Israel. This is why he describes Christian living as being like someone following a road narrow, winding and filled with potholes. It is not easy following the Jesus Way as it leads to Golgotha.

Our starting point must always be: what would Jesus do or say?

With Lent fast approaching, the Sermon on the Mount takes on a whole new radical way of living for those who are listening to God and not to the world. The *wokistas* do not offer forgiveness and restoration, but Jesus does, just as he offers eternal life, peace and a world of “milk and honey” for those who follow His ways. The starting point must always be what God has revealed to us and how the Church from the beginning has understood and taught these revelations. Only from that point can we then go on to apply these divine expectations to pastoral realities. Kingdom teachings must always be salt and light to culture. It cannot be the other way around.

As we know from parenting, very often we need to say “no” as a way of showing genuine love for our children. We might want to be gods, but we remain but grace filled creatures.