



## **Lent 3**

# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

*Jesus guarantees: give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed down and overflowing will be poured into your lap. Imagine living like this every day!*

## **We must be Holy in the way God is holy**

Does anyone remember the Old Testament reading from Leviticus 19 we had back in February 19th? The coincidence of the two figures -19 – helped me in remembering. The reading was speaking about the covenant God had freely chosen to make with this people he had chosen. It was to be a relationship built on intimacy, a desire to live in the presence of the Almighty and to refuse to go after the ways of the nations around them. They could have one God, and one God only, and that God was Yahweh.

There is the memorable teaching in this passage. If the Hebrew people wanted to fulfil their obligations, they had to ***be Holy, live out divine holiness because I the Lord your God am holy.*** Again, in that context, love of God was associated with love of neighbour. Do we not find that intriguing? The number of times in the Bible where God equates the love people have for him with the love people have for their neighbours? It seems that it is impossible to love God without a corresponding love for neighbour. Everyone without exception. Why is that?

## ***Do you want to find God? He is at work and active in your neighbour!***

Possibly; probably it has something to do with the breath of God, the image and likeness of God having been written into the spiritual DNA of all men and women. To love God in the commandments but not love God in our neighbour is hypocrisy, a serious failure in obedience and humility. It does not help us when Jesus then comes along and deepens our understanding of what is required of us by God. He accepts the old laws but then adds...*but I say to you.*

The old law was great in its original setting of the wilderness and those early years in Canaan. If someone wronged another, let us say killed a member of their family. The cultural response allowed for the wiping out of the entire family of the killer as a kind of bush justice. What Leviticus was demanding, and this was the revolutionary nature of the Covenant, was that justice demanded that only the killer be killed. No one else. It limited the response to evil.

Not quite justice in our contemporary world but an amazing social transformation at the time. What Jesus did was even more revolutionary. There was to be no revenge, no payback, no attacks at all on the ones who offend us. We are to forgive them; turn the other cheek; forgive them seventy-seven times seventy-seven. The reasoning for this is the same as the Old Law – these people upon whom I am pouring out my “revenge” are children of God, creatures in whom the very breath of God dwells. They are in the image and likeness of God, and whatever I do to them I do directly to God. But God did not say that was going to be easy. Bringing healing and salvation to others, surely one of our driving motives in our Christian living, cost Jesus his life. He died a most horrendous death that we might be saved. Sacrificed his life and are we not now reaping the abundance of blessings on account of that sacrifice? That is what is now being asked of us. We are to sacrifice our present striving for “victory” in the fighting that someone else may be saved.

## **Walking in Jesus' own skin, living as he lived**

Of course, Jesus added a further dimension in that he took on the fullness of our human nature. He was one of us and so he could add to this holiness command by later saying...*whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me*. No exceptions.

We should not be surprised at the absolute nature of these commands in the Sermon on the Mount. They are demanding of us nothing more or less than a lifestyle build on the model of Jesus. He understood how those commands of the Sermon are what the Father expected of him as he inaugurated the New Covenant. What Jesus was seeking was the conversion of the sinner, not their punishment. Reconciliation, not alienation; justice and mercy not punishment.

Turning the cheek to our opponents is not a political strategy to minimise further conflict or to being a ceasefire to the situation. It is striving for the holiness demanded of us by God through our imitation of Christ who, like a lamb to the slaughter, remained silent. In his silence, in his suffering, in the shedding of his own life-blood, salvation came to the world. The imitation of his humble suffering in moments of conflict also has the opportunity of bringing another to Christ and through Christ salvation and life eternal.

### ***Turning the other cheek is more than a mere metaphor***

All of this is rarely about turning the other cheek because someone might be physically abusing us. Our failures in the love commandment are generally more subtle – racism, sexism, bullying, all of the phobias, judgmentalism, partisanship, anything that sets one person against another. And let us not forget Satan's favourite – Gossip to hurt another. When we separate someone off, in any way that is a negative, we are failing in holiness. As soon as we find ourselves in a situation that is a "them" and "us", we have failed God and why would we sit back and kid ourselves that God is somehow O.K with that? Do we really convince ourselves that God understands the wider context of what is going on; understands our pain, our anger and our frustration and reassures us that all is well, that he will "sort out" the other person?

In the light of our reading through the Gospels of Matthew and Luke this Lent, we need to remind ourselves of the fundamental calling of Jesus: ***Repent! Believe the Good News***. That word repent is a whole-of-life commandment. It is something impinging on our every word and deed, a vocation that reaches into our hearts and our souls so that our response to God and to others is always new, always refreshing itself. It is always healing, uplifting and saving.

One of the great blessings of striving to live in this manner is the way forgiving others and embracing them in love is so healing for us. Rejecting someone and keeping them isolated and hurting does our own inner peace no good. It makes us bitter and eats away at our souls. Offer that same person unconditional love; forgive them, reach out to them and seek to share the love of God with them brings us straight into the presence of God, and where God is there is the Garden of Eden. God's blessings are far richer than anything the world may have to offer.

We live in a quid pro quo world where love is measured out in small, earned portions. That is not the Gospel way. What we need is extravagant mercy so that we can learn from our mistakes, to be foolish when folly may be the wisest course. Sow extravagantly, even where there is no chance of return and we will then find good soil and an extravagant harvest. That is the Kingdom Way.