



To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless. G.K. Chesterton

April 14th

The Shofar

Acts 3

They wanted Barabbas (3:13-14)

There is a kind of savage irony in the reading from acts where Peter outlines the way in which the much anticipated and long awaited Servant described by Isaiah in **52:13-53:12** had been handed over by the Jewish people to be killed by Pilate (**Luke 23:1-25**). To point out the irony within the irony, Pilate, representing a pagan government, wanted to let Jesus go free. Luke had put in place the foundation for Peter's point by citing this fact in his Gospel. On three occasions, Luke mentioned Pilate wanting to release Jesus (**Luke 23: 4, 16, 22**), all against the clamour of God's own people. How had things sunk to such a low? What had gone wrong with Judaism, with religious life in Jerusalem God's own home?

The bitter irony goes on as we see in the crucifixion of Jesus. A criminal was given freedom, but the man who wanted to bring the nation spiritual freedom was executed. Jesus' death became a supreme travesty of humanity's injustice and spiritual blindness. In contrast to the murderer Barabbas, Jesus was "the Holy and Righteous One" (**verse 14**).

God raised him up

Continuing with his sermon, Peter said his hearers had disowned Jesus and "killed the author of life." But "God raised him from the dead" (**3:15**). The Greek word translated "author" has a range of meanings, including leader, founder, cause, originator, pioneer. Jesus is the *founder* of eternal life in the sense that he is its giver (**John 10:28; 1 John 1:4**). He is also the *leader* in that he has paved the way by being the first-born of many who will follow him in resurrection (**Romans 8:29**). Ultimately, Jesus is the source and high point in God's saving works, the *pioneer* who both paved the way and accomplished the task (**Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 12:2**) for all of us.

Why did the Jews reject Jesus?

The Jews rejected Jesus because He failed, in their eyes, to do what they expected their Messiah to do:

destroy evil and in particular the occupying Romans and in so doing establish an eternal kingdom with Israel as the nation to whom all other nations brought tribute. The prophecies in **Isaiah 53** and **Psalms 22** describe a suffering Messiah who would be persecuted and killed, but the Jews chose instead to focus on those prophecies that discuss His glorious victories, not His death as a criminal.

The commentaries in the Talmud (a compilation of ancient teachings regarded as sacred and normative by Jews from the time it was compiled until modern times and still so regarded by traditional religious Jews begun as early as 5th century BC), discuss the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 and puzzle over how these would be fulfilled with the glorious setting up of the kingdom of the Messiah. It was a mystery that proved too much for the Jewish leadership to comprehend. The whole idea of their Messiah suffering and dying the hideous death if a criminal was too much for them.

And then, to make matters worse, along come the Christians using those same prophecies to prove their claims that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified, and is now risen and appearing among them, was their long-awaited Messiah of God. They could not both be right.

Exclusiveness was the mark of Judaism

At the time of Jesus Judaism was an exclusive religion, one in which non-Jews were portrayed as their enemies and so the enemies of God. The problem with Jesus was that his ministry from God was inclusive, inviting all, men and women, Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners alike into the family of God. Jesus opened the door to God for everyone: for the simple ones and even for the Gentiles. Saints and sinners, all were invited to the banqueting table of God's Kingdom. In

Jesus, all peoples can now find a future, hope, comfort, joy and everlasting life.

Contrary to the rabbinical explanation and according to the descriptions in the New Testament gospels, the main reason the Pharisees rejected Jesus as Messiah lies in the fact that the religious leaders of his time had been corrupted. They prioritised the human emotions of control, power, reputation and money at the expense of the people. Jesus appeared and threatened the exclusiveness of the religious key holders used to running things their own way. If the people of Israel accepted and followed Jesus, they would surely lose their power, their influence, their control, their honoured position and of course, their source of income which was tied to their work.

Rabbinical Judaism was not Christian

The contrast with Jesus could not have been greater. While the Rabbis, were busy coming up with legalistic traditions and rules, isolating their people from the world and defying the Gentiles Jesus talked about grace, modesty, compassion and love. While the Rabbis were busy with oppressing and intimidating the people making them view God as some kind of moral monster who only wants to punish, Jesus talked openly about the fact that all need the love and forgiveness of God. Forgiveness that is based on God's grace and compassion, not on our own human attempts to impress him with all kinds of ceremonies and habits.

Where others threw stones, Jesus forgave. While others blamed the poor for their own suffering, Jesus had built up a fellowship with the outcasts. He patiently and willingly listened to their troubles, healed the lepers and ate with the families of those who were a part of the rejected ones, those the formal religion considered to be unloved by God. Where others only saw prostitutes, tax collectors and worthless sinful fishermen, Jesus saw a group of God's people with the potential to change the world.

But we are not like the Rabbis...

The religion of the rabbinical tradition tries to develop the idea that God cares only about the members of their sect and hates the rest of the

world. They wanted to make all of Israel believe that God cares only about Jews. In fact, the Rabbis have been claiming for 2000 years that only the Jews are important, and that God does not care about the Gentiles. Jesus stood up against the claim that there is a group of people who are better or more important in God's eyes than other people. That they are right while those who disagree with them are wrong, are sinners. The NT on the other hand calls the followers of Jesus to love, grace and compassion, mercy and peace among all people without exception. This proved to be a threat to the intimidation and the oppression imposed by the rabbinical tradition.

Jesus saw no "outsiders"

We should not presume that in some way the Church of the present era is more faithful to God than the religious leaders of Judaism in the time of Jesus. We too can find ourselves with "in groups" and those who we prefer to keep on the fringes. There are those who like the good old-time religion and those who have eyes on what God is doing in the present to grow the Church of the future.

We have our own groups of the "unclean". They are our equivalent of the lepers and tax collectors. We prefer to keep to the margins because we do not like them or understand them, as they are unlike us and in their own ways are ungodly. Key holders are the same today as they were two thousand years ago. It all comes down to a lack of faith and hope and where those two are not to be found, love too cannot find a hope.

The Risen Jesus changes everything

There never has been a shortage of those who love religion and assess others in terms of the way they fit in with what has been "the way we do things". They hold the keys, the power and are they not afraid to use them.

Our readings from Acts today shows the courage faith builds and the hope it instils in the heart of those who strive to live out that which they profess. They know Jesus *IS* risen and *IS* with them and their priority is to walk in *His* ways.

It is always uncertain and God's ways are always mysterious but there is great Joy in allowing God to do what God alone does best.