"We need to wake up and pay attention to the culture around us. Because the same grace that has been given so freely to you and me is available to everyone outside the walls of the church, and someone needs to tell them that. And that someone is us."

December 8th **The Shofar** Advent 2

Let us pursue the Way of the Lord

Psalm 25 is one of the more encouraging and helpful psalms that pop up in our readings for Advent. It sets down in splendid clarity the direction all believers need to be pursuing across the four weeks of Advent. There we hear *Lord, make me know your ways. Lord, teach me your paths. Make me walk in your truth and teach me: for you are God my Saviour.* The psalmist reminds us that as creatures of Almighty God, the Father of Jesus Christ who spoke to us down through the ages; who revealed not only his infinite and loving character, but also The Way men and women needed to be living in order to experience the fullness for which we were created.

In short, God has a Way. God is the Way. He has revealed that Way to us and he expects us to be living according to what has been revealed. In the End, it is this divinely ruled Way that will form the basis of our final judgment. It is all there in the Bible and across two thousand years plus of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding the Body of Christ the Church. Trust and obey: our response.

We are God-bearers, or we fail

In this we find one of the key reasons for God calling first a nation – Israel. It was through the way she lived in the world, through her faithfulness to the divine covenant, that the whole world would be freed from the slavery imposed on them by pagan lifestyles and idolatry. They could only be set free through coming to know, love and serve the One True and Almighty God. It was for this reason too he sent his Only-begotten Son to become a man, as God and Man. Not just so that the twelve who followed him closely could find freedom and life, but so that all peoples and nations could experience the fullness of life that comes only through the loving embrace of the Christ who lived, died, rose and now reigns. This is the only abiding reason for calling the Church into existence. To serve the world by a witness of faithfulness, obedience, disciplined lifestyles and self-sacrifice.

Surprise! Surprise!
There are ways other than the Way of God!

The Archbishops of Perth and Brisbane were in the papers this week announcing a change to the Church rules that expected clergy and lay workers to "maintain chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage" they would ***now*** be asked to "value God's gift of sexuality and take responsibility for their sexual conduct. The headline in the Australian read: Anglican Church leader brands chastity for priests 'unhelpful and archaic'. As we begin our season of Advent, how might we seek to respond to two of our most senior Bishops in the Anglican Church of Australia, and according to the press, there are other Bishops and dioceses going along the same pathway.

And there we find why it is we need God's gift of the season of Advent. When a Church decides to change the ways of God to make the message of God more "acceptable" and more "attractive" to a world desperate for moral leadership and direction, it is time for all of us to do penance and to pray constantly to God

It is as if the Anglican Church has decided to be the new Tower of Babel. Our leaders feel they are gods and are beyond the limitation of mere humans. Is this why we find our Church is going through an historic period of decline? We no longer offer the world anything to lighten their burdens, to shine light into their darkness and to fill them with hope in a future abounding in the abundant blessings of God. Martyrs in the past, and in parts of the world today, die for the sacredness of their God-given vocations to be Christ bearers in the world. Sadly, too many of those who are called to be shepherds, have decided instead to be wolves.

Just so we are clear

That word chastity comes from the Greek word ἁγνός" in **1 Peter 3:2.** The primary meaning of

the word denotes moral purity. The Scriptures emphasise chastity and moral purity in religious devotion in both Testaments. Israelites were called upon to lead lives that would reflect moral purity or chastity. Such chastity was expected to stem from their religious devotion to Yahweh and was to mark them as being separate from the practices of the surrounding nations (Lev 20:21). It called them to live as God called them to be living - regardless of how the rest of the world chose to live. Being chaste made them stand out among the hedonistic ways of their neighbours and this in turn led others to a contact with Israel's God.

Likewise in the NT we see the understanding of the early believers that Christ taught the sanctity of marriage (See John 2:1-11; Matt 19:3-6; 22:1-14; 25:1-13.). In addition, Christ's activities at such occasions as the marriage supper in Cana of Galilee (John 2) would lead one to believe that His teachings concerning chastity did not involve avoidance of social gatherings and related festivities. He could celebrate along with the best of them but understood the ways of His Father, the Divine plan the Almighty had woven into the DNA of creation put structures around the way we were to bne living in the world. Despite frequent involvement with the pagan culture surrounding Him, Christ manifested a style of life which revealed self-control and impeccable moral purity. He set a way he expects us to follow.

The early followers of Christ understood this and, like the ancient Jews, accepted that through their baptismal commitments, they were expected to be distinguishable from the world around them by their chaste, faithful, disciplined moral lives (1 Cor 5:6-13; 2 Cor 6:14-18; Titus 2:5; and 1 Pet 3:2). In contrast to the lascivious practices common across the Roman Empire, the early Christian communities stressed moral chastity, both prior to and during marriage and condemned indirectly if not directly such practices as polygamy, infidelity, debauchery of any kind, and the abundance of self-serving licentiousness that was evidenced in the frequent social events that were a part of the pagan world. Added to this, we find the Church referred to as a "chaste" virgin by Paul (2 Cor 11:2}. Christians were exhorted to maintain purity in their external practices and in their thought lives (Matt 5-7; Gal 5:19-6:9; Phil 4:5-9}. Christians were expected to be distinguishable from the world around by their emphasis on moral purity in religious devotion to God.

Today, the second Sunday of Advent, we are urged to take seriously God's call to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the birth of Christ, our Saviour, at Christmas. All the readings on this season advise us most urgently to make ourselves ready, to be on the alert, to turn aside from our sinful ways, and give more time to God in our lives. *Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*, is the way Isaiah expresses this call. We must not live lives of darkness and of sin, St Paul admonishes his listeners; but let us put on the armour of God's grace, and appear in the light, meaning that our consciences should have nothing to hide at any time. They are to be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit directing them. "*Be vigilant, stay awake*," is the warning from Jesus. At any moment we may be called upon to make an eternal choice, and that as unexpectedly as the people who were swallowed up by the Flood, in the time of Noah. Then we are on our own before the judgment seat of God, and the one defence that will not get us very far is "our Bishops told us so".

Deuteronomy 20:18 puts this kind of warning down in the starkest of language…*But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death*. Jesus in **Matthew 24:24** warns that such dangers will be a part of the struggles of the Church in latter times…*24 For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.* **2 Timothy 4:3-4** shows that such false teachings have been a part of the faith communities woes from the beginning. We need to be alert… *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.* Be alert! Be faithful.Repent.