



October 4th

THE NEW SHOFAR

God is first, last and all in between

we put too much emphasis on our own efforts

***And He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.***

Scholars argue as to whether Isaiah is addressing the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah. It does not really matter because Israel went off into exile in Assyria (722) and Judah to exile in Babylon (587). Another helpful is the time of king David's reign – 1000 B.C. It only took some 278 years for God's people to crumble and fall, to be driven from the land of milk and honey given to them by God.

Prior to crossing the river Jordan and entering Canaan, Moses laid down the conditions of entry in no uncertain terms. To enter God under divine blessing and by living in Canaan as God's people, they are choosing *life*. That means they are rejecting *death*.

Moses is clear on what all of this means for the people as they move into the Promised Land. Among foreigners, they will be faced with all kinds of temptations. It is a new and dangerous world for them, and they can only find the richness of God's Covenant promises if they remain faithful. That is – they live the terms of the Covenant: There is only One God and they are to worship and serve under that One God and none other.

What God wants is...?

The prophet Hosea, writing around the same time, made the will of God known to the people of Israel... *For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings*. It is difficult to translate the Hebrew here, but the message is important. God expects from His covenanted people a *constant love, faithfulness, loyalty, people who delight in faithfulness, loving kindness*, and there are possibly more. The message is clear. Our life with God is not all about piety, about the way in which we engage with God in worship, prayer and the "offering of sacrifices".

When Jesus used this text in Matthew's Gospel (9:12) He was addressing the Pharisees who were highly critical of Him sitting with tax collectors, for mixing with sinners and those who were clearly beyond the love of God. But Jesus is not trying to teach about the necessity of becoming social workers in the Name of God.

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I all has to begin and end in God

There seems to be thinking among Christians that our love for God is about what we do for God. It is about our faithfulness in worship. About going to Church and taking part in liturgies giving programmes, and involvement in parishes. It is about things we do in the Name of God. But for the prophets and for Jesus, those kinds of things are at least secondary, well away from our primary vocation.

We have grown up over generations to believe we are here on earth to be tested for a worthiness for heaven. God weighs up our sins and our good actions and then we are judged on the balance of the evidence. We end up either in heaven or in hell. That has fallen by the wayside as we have come to study the Scriptures and explore more broadly the will of God for us. What God wants is for us to *be with Him*. For us to *love Him*.

We need to turn popular thinking around. Salvation is not about us pursuing God. It is about God, in Christ, pursuing us. We can never be worthy to stand in the Divine Presence but God, in His loving kindness, mercy and love, welcomes us...*even while we are still sinners*. This is what Hosea has in mind as the starting point of everything else.

And it is still about God

Psalm 31 can help us here... *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart*". Unless God is the source of what "delights", then we will not know the beauty and power of God's life within us. We will know only what we can create for ourselves in spiritual activities, know only what we allow God to be for us and do in us.

God does not need our worship, but God most certainly wants it from us. What He wants is everything love means...*you shall love the Lord your God with all your...* Only then does the text go on to talk about love of neighbour. We are not created to be social workers. We are created and put on this earth to be collaborators, co-workers with God in the work of creation but can only achieve this when we think, speak and act as creatures *in the image and likeness of God*. Leave that key element out and we become more like the people constructing the Tower of Babel. We are doomed to fail.

This is what Jesus was on about in His parable of the talents

Sunday's readings are all about producing the fruit expected by God. It is the fulfilling of our vocations as God's creatures. However, this cannot be allowed to rest on what we are able to achieve through our blood, sweat and tears. They are important and necessary but a waste of time if our relationship with God is anything other than deep and passionate. Look at Israel and Judah. They put so much wealth and effort into their Temples, worship and sacrifices. They ended up in Exile. Why? Because they had come to believe they had the power to change the world. They forgot God must be the beginning and the end.

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