



THE NEW SHOFAR

The gates of Hell cannot stand

When the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed and lived

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I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place – Isaiah

The setting here is Jerusalem on the eve of the Babylonian invasion. Surrounded by her traditional enemies, peoples who had sided with Babylon and served the invaders as mercenaries, the citizens of Jerusalem are in panic mode. Their leaders had fled. The institutions in whom they had placed their hope for survival had crumbled and abandoned them. What are they to do? Who will replace them and give them hope?

Of course, Isaiah had God's answer to that: *The prophet calls for weeping, mourning and sackcloth (repentance), but instead the people have developed the attitude of eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.* That was an answer they did not want to hear. The nation wanted to *blame* someone for their woes – their leaders, the politicians, the King, the priests, the wealthy, the Babylonians and their neighbours.

They turned themselves into hopeless victims of circumstances beyond their control. Isaiah reveals how hope for the future is not to be found in the destruction of the Babylonians. Their hope is in their midst. The blame and cure is within them. Hope is in the God who called them, who chose them and who is with them in all things.

God is the peg on which they can hang their hopes for a new world; a hope for a future beyond the fear, chaos and hopelessness in which they find themselves living.

Jesus is The peg on which our futures can be hung with confidence

The important thing in Matthew's narrative is how the Church's future does not rest on Peter. Does not rest on any institution. It is Christ who builds the Church. It is Christ who prevents the *Gates of Hell* from resisting God's saving activity in human history. All it takes is the kind of response Peter makes. It is not perfect. It does not stop him from making bad mistakes and misreading the signs of the time. Peter's imperfections and failures of faith do not stop God's saving works. God loves us too much for that.

Importantly, Matthew records this exchange taking place in the pagan world in the area of Caesarea Philippi, home to the god Pan. He was the god of shepherds, of nature and the pastures needed for feeding his followers (who were likened to sheep).

For the evangelist, people of every age will need to choose over and over again: on what peg (or pegs) are we going to hang our hope for the future. Is it a peg from the world around us? A man/Pan-made peg – politics, science, hard work, money, success, fame? There may be many pegs but there needs to be a peg which is ***The*** peg.

Israel chose the wrong peg and disaster followed

The question being asked here is a question all need to answer: *who is this man?* This is not a once only answer, given at our Baptism or Confirmation. It is a daily answer that is required. If the Christ to whom we commit ourselves is not involved in the entirety of our daily activities, He is not the Christ proclaimed by Matthew.

The problem for these apostles and those following along after Jesus is that He was not among them in the way they were expecting. There was a range of hopes for the coming Messiah and Jesus did not fit into any of them. He came among us in the way His Father wanted Him among us. We are the ones who need to be changing our expectations. Jesus will be our Christ, our Messiah in the way we need Him to be and not necessarily in the way we want Him to be in our lives.

This is where Isaiah's message from God becomes important for today's believers – *repent, mourn and weep* on account of our spiritual fragility. If our "pegs" are not working as we would hope they work, then the time has come for a transformation in the way we live in Christ and in the way we allow God to work in and through us.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things (Paul)

The importance of this text is that it moves us far beyond the idea that Jesus was a good man, that He was someone like a Ghandi or a Mother Theresa. It is a challenge to the Church to come to Jesus as God's Messiah, as the Son of God. The people of the time could point to Jesus as being some kind of prophetic figure, someone with a powerful message and teachings that could change the world for good. That on its own is a wonderful insight but more is demanded of the disciples of Jesus. Christ is much more.

Peter's declaration stands as the starting point for believers: *Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Son of the living God.* He is not the Messiah for believers only. He is the Messiah for all men and women. The world's Messiah and Saviour. He is The Truth for the world and not just the Church. Jesus and not a "Pan" is the only Shepherd able to lead and feed God's hungry, lost, thirsty and endangered "sheep".

Jesus Christ is the Messiah and we are called upon to believe that reality and respond accordingly. A non-divine Jesus makes no sense. What Peter is affirming is how Jesus is the answer to all human questions, to our yearnings, hopes, dreams and expectations. The first answer is always Jesus and if Jesus is our first affirmation, then the rest of our human actions and activities will bring us blessings.

We either believe Christ is *in all things* or we have not heard the Gospel proclaimed. There are many peoples and ways of living that are presented to us as being "messiahs" but none of these are ***our true and only*** messiah. The proof given by Jesus is the guarantee that *the gates of hell*, the power and might of Satan will never be able to stop the spread of the Kingdom. The Gospel lived and proclaimed will always defeat the darkness of Hell and be an immovable bulwark against Evil and death.