

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The People Were Loud In Their Praise

The first Christian community, it appears, had very good public relations. If we examine our own reputation in the twenty-first century we may feel pretty envious of them. Why did they have such good repute?

"When All Speak Well Of You... .."

.....beware! This was how their forefathers treated false prophets!" Jesus says that as a warning, and follows it with a beatitude: "Blessed are you when all speak evil of you; this is how their forefathers treated true prophets." Can we claim that the obloquy and mistrust offered to the modern Church comes from its prophetic challenge? Partly I think we can. The Church challenges the society we live in for its prejudice and its wilful ignoring of the poor; it accuses the world of setting up undisguised selfishness in place of justice and truth. It calls out for justice towards the weak, the starving, the powerless, and the unborn. In all sorts of ways it bears witness against the cruelty and heartlessness of the way we are living. The annunciation of the Christian gospel is the proclamation of the kingship of the lowly, the blessedness of the poor. Christ is not with the powerful and the rich, quite the reverse. This is a revolutionary message, and the world cannot listen to it with tolerance. In return, the world is glad to seize on the scandalous weakness of the members of the Church, and to defuse their message with the counter-charge of hypocrisy.

The Loneliness Of Thomas

I always feel that Thomas carries a special message for us in today's reading from John. *He was not with them when Jesus came.* Something isolated him from the others; he was nicknamed *the Twin*, which is far from suggesting a solitary character. Was the experience of devastation forcing him away from the others: did he find their stricken and bereft company too much to bear? And what was he thinking of, as he wandered by himself? Judging by his response when they told him of their encounter with the risen Lord, we can only think that he was

dwelling on the awful image of the crucifixion: the wounds of Jesus, their real dimensions, the certainty of their effect, the authority with which they brought his death. He has a fierce compassion, refusing to gloss over the suffering of his Master, clinging to its dreadfulness. Perhaps Thomas felt he could only remain faithful to the dead Jesus by letting the Cross take him over too. With his mind inhabited by this unspeakable thing, he was no company for anyone. Thomas' was undergoing a lonely Way of the Cross all of his own.

Eight Days Later

The bitterness of Thomas' rejection of the first proclamation of the Gospel makes him a very modern voice. *Don't talk to me about life, and grace, and hope. I know what I saw. Who are you to tell me otherwise anyway?* There is only one person who can speak to him in this pass. Eight days later, he comes to find Thomas; and then the Fourth Gospel finds its climax in that huge act of faith, *My Lord, and my God.* No-one else in' the Bible calls Jesus "God". Perhaps the surliness and bitterness of the modern world towards the Church and its message is not so far away or so negative as it seems. If Thomas could be turned around so totally, *so can our world.* The condition for it to happen is that we should learn to speak in the accents of the risen Jesus. That is the only voice that will do it for the world. In order to be evangelists, we have to be holy; and holiness is a divine gift, which grows in those who are loved by God, and who love God in response. Our becoming holy is not some sort of self-adornment. It is a vital need for the whole world. As Jesus said at the Last Supper: *For their sake, I consecrate myself, so that they too may be consecrated in truth.* It is by his pouring out of his life -consecration that Jesus becomes *sacred* to his Father. We (confessedly poor disciples) can only be credible apostles when we too can show the world the same wounds in our hands and hearts.
Fr Philip