

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Keeping Bad Company

Reading the press you'd think that the human race was neatly divided into two groups: the good and the bad. Bad people make sensational news, and if the supply falls short, you can always get *limited* mileage out of a saint, if you can find one.

A Dangerous Mistake

We know in our hearts that it's false, because we know that there's plenty about us that wouldn't bear much publicity, and there's also real goodness and generosity in our nature too. Walking around pretending to be a marvellous saint is a ridiculous business, fooling no-one. But there's greater danger in the assumption that we, or those we meet, are evil. There's a moment in *Paradise Lost* where Satan says: "Evil, be thou my Good!" This huge act of integrity is very chilling; but do people ever commit to evil like that?

Prize Example

I've tried to study Hitler, and it's actually very hard to find evil as wholehearted as that in him. He never allowed what was happening to the Jews to be discussed in his presence, for instance: he merely let it be known that he would not interfere if they were "dealt with" by the likes of Himmler and Heydrich. Hitler himself was remarkably colourless, and as the war runs its course, he looks more and more like a bored person with an empty life; the tiny group of secretaries who were compelled to share his evenings were almost killed by the empty tedium of his endless recitals about his early struggles, using the same words night after night. The arch-demon of modern history was an exhausted, directionless husk, dead in the water. Some people think all sin is caused by lack of imagination. Certainly Hitler didn't even allow himself to *think* about his crimes; increasingly he didn't even face the people he tyrannised. He was obviously shutting out the awful truth which he had brought into being; and he spent his last day on earth looking at a grandiose model for the rebuilding of his Austrian home-town, one of his pathetically unfulfilled dreams. Then he killed himself.

Jesus Ate With Sinners

The willingness of Jesus to eat with sinners is part of the bedrock of the Gospel. As a man of those times, he might be expected to be reserved like a Pharisee, keeping apart from the godless. One of

the Psalms says: *I will not sit down with wasters, no sinner shall be my friend* – one of many instructions not to keep company with sinners. So Jesus displays an unexpected attitude, which goes beyond conventional holiness as other Rabbis understood it. What impelled Jesus to break ranks? I think it is one of those themes which show us his divinity, as opposed to his first-century human nature. It wasn't that he doubted their sinfulness: his own explanation in today's Gospel admits that. What's really significant is that he seems to ask for no *repentance* before calling the tax-collector. I therefore believe that he called him to discipleship on his own authority, just as he claimed authority to forgive sins in his own right. Instead of asking him to keep the commandments, and so come to be a disciple, Jesus calls him as he is; keeping the commandments can follow later. This cuts across the attitude of the pious Pharisees, and perfectly mirrors the attitude of God, as Paul recognised it: *what proves that God loves us, is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.*

Jesus, Unafraid Of Evil

No-one knows what sin is so clearly as Jesus. In that area he makes no mistakes. Yet he goes amongst the sinful without fear. He is deliberately "getting into bad company". Prudent parents would be appalled: surely, they would say, this man will come to a sticky end....and you have to say, they were entirely right. *Fr Philip*