

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

This Nation's Heart Is Coarsened

Jesus, quoting Isaiah, speaks of the heart of Israel, so often addressed by God through the prophets. The message of the prophets is frequently harsh and challenging, but never so worrying as when God is addressing the prophet, so to speak, *behind the nation's back*. The words Jesus quotes are heavy with irony, as God parodies hard-hearted Israel, shutting her ears and eyes against the possibility of conversion and healing. Jesus too is ironic, as he tells his disciples that he is speaking in riddles *so that his hearers will not understand*. The notion of a Jesus who is purposely pulling the wool over people's eyes is not one we can accept. Jesus is God's Word. He does not design to conceal, but to reveal.

How Parables Work

The truth is that parables don't work simply, and aren't designed to be blatant. They're stories that allow the hearer to interact. They always end with the question, *What do you think?* – or, as Jesus often puts it, *Let whoever has ears listen!* Instead of issuing a hard-hitting principle, or a theological statement, Jesus preferred to tell a story. The listeners can then draw their own conclusion. You end up with something more than a theory or a law: the listeners make a personal response, and their response always brings out the truth about *them*. Clearly it would be absurd for the teacher to explain a parable in advance; it would be as self-defeating as explaining a joke. If the joke needs explaining, it isn't a joke at all. Humour has to be shared, and instantaneous: as the point comes home, people suddenly burst into laughter. They may catch on at different speeds, but if you try to help them out, you ruin the joke and make them feel stupid. The parable is exactly the same. You might take a couple of puffs on your pipe before you respond, but the response has to be yours, not someone else's. Equally, we don't say: *So what's the answer?* The answer is what we want to make it: but very often it will not be easy to accept. This sort of story sometimes has a sting in the tail, and the message is, *if the cap fits, wear it!*

Coarsened English Hearts

It's not hard to detect the measure of coarseness in our national character. What makes people coarse? Disappointment, and failure, and defeat; but also the sort of continual puzzlement which leaves us living in a fog. In England we seem to have lost the use of our nerve-endings. We don't know how

we feel even about very important matters. We've managed to make unthinkable decisions about life and death, about the family, about our relationships; if you had told the people who cheered at Victoria's Golden Jubilee that in a century's time half of English people would be divorced, 67% of children in Corby would be born out of wedlock (3% in Victorian London), and 30% of English women would have had at least one abortion at public expense, they would have stared. We can't bear cruelty to Labradors, but a homeless man would do better on Long Row as a Labrador than as a human being. As for a hungry African, or an Indian without clean water, or a Chinese without health care, we can live with that, whilst we invent new ways to waste our money on turning our bedrooms into Bedouin tents or creating stainless steel water-features in the back garden, or putting humps on the roads to prevent ourselves from driving too fast. I suspect that the average Nottinghamian would not choose to walk through the City Centre after 10 pm, and would hesitate to walk anywhere in four or five districts of the city which have become famous for shootings, muggings, and armed robbery. These are signs of coarsened hearts; and it isn't a matter of not listening to parables. It's a matter of not knowing any longer what human life is worth, and what one human being owes another. *Fr*

Philip