

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Priests, You Have Destroyed The Covenant

These terrible words are addressed to the Temple priesthood by the prophet whose book we place last in the Old Testament. It is as if this awful verdict closes the account of the time before Christ with failure.

Covenant

This powerful term denotes the whole relationship between God and Israel. It isn't a casual relationship, made up of a series of incidents, but a bonded, vowed relationship like a marriage. Some of the prophets are bold enough to depict God as a betrayed husband, bitterly reproaching Israel with her unfaithfulness. Ezekiel is particularly violent in his language. What's striking in this sort of writing, set in a body of literature designed to glorify God, is the amazing indignity of its portrayal. The Most High is drawn as a cuckolded husband, his fidelity ignored, dishonoured, and traded on by the loose woman he thought fit to espouse - Israel. We have to pinch ourselves to believe the phrase, *this is the word of the Lord*.

The Treason Of Priests

It is particularly awful if the priests, whose rôle is to represent in their own persons a reverent, devoted Israel ready to serve in God's presence, should betray their calling and lead the people into infidelity. But the accusation is made, that they have profaned the covenant itself, the very relationship between God and Israel, instead of embodying it. It would surely be nonsense, on the day when we read the Lord's denunciation of the priests of the Old Covenant, not to take note of the state of the priesthood of the New Testament in our own day. *I will curse you, and will curse your very blessing!* This appalling threat from Malachi turns the blood cold. But the dereliction of some priests in our own day have certainly fulfilled the terms of the prophecy: *you have strayed from the way, and have caused many to stumble* must with sorrow be said of too many of the clergy, and the Church is in a very real crisis because of it. There are many verdicts and accounts of what has gone wrong, and where the fault lies. Today, all over the world, I am sure that priests and people will be meditating on the words of the Gospel, seeking their guidance in the difficulty we are facing.

Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus addresses his strictures to the Scribes – that is, the scholars and intellectuals called *Rabbi* – and the Pharisees, who seemed to consider themselves the utter fulfilment of God's plan. Thus there is a lack of humility, which should flow from a prayerful attitude in God's presence. Instead, they have become obsessed with themselves, and their own dignity in the eyes of others. We can surely identify a weakening of the life of prayer in our day, and also the replacement of prayer with human relationships. We *look to one another, for the approval which should come from the One God* (Jn 5:44). This weakens the authority of the Church, since the Church must fearlessly speak in Christ's name, not give out the message which is most pleasant to its own ears. If we stray from the path of holiness, replacing its motives with earthly recipes for fulfilment, then we'll be unable to be priests, and become hungry wolves, whose emptiness will seek to be filled with everything other than God. It's hard to distinguish between that graceless pastorate, and the image of one who *goes about like a ravening lion, seeking whom he may devour*.

Pray For Each Other

It is the shared task of all Christians to pray the Church into holiness. We must support one another unceasingly. Priests who have no support from their people come to grief as surely as people who have no ministry from their priests. We should all consider ourselves in debt to each other, in the mutual love of God's Covenant.
Fr Philip