

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Demands and Commandments

There is in the divided and suffering Church a multitude of ways of embodying the Lord's will; not all as good as each other, and most of them suffering from the lack of each other. *All Christians together* make up the Body of Christ, and if we lack communion the whole body is damaged by it. This is true when two parishioners fall out of friendship, but it also applies when someone has the bright idea of starting a different church. It is because of this that we are left with a plethora of churches, each possessing a limited range of good qualities (like the simplicity of Methodism, the complexity of Catholicism, the sense of mystery of the Orthodox, the plainness of the Puritans, and so on); very often the quality which we develop in our different communions owes as much to our social or geographical circumstances as it does to the directives of the Holy Spirit. To this partial and slightly blinkered Christianity the Bible, especially the Old Testament, can speak with a grand, austere totality that addresses us all equally and reminds us that there is only one God, however many the "parcels" into which human beings may try to separate him. Don't we get frustrated with the complexity of religion, and long for the mighty unity of God, his totality and simplicity, which sums up all things and exceeds all things and transcends all things?

The Ten Commandments

Today's first reading does this powerfully. The "Ten Words" uttered to Moses on top of Mount Sinai are spoken with divine weight and authority, and their demand is for a human obedience which is not questionable, because the law they promulgate corresponds to human nature as God has created it. We know instinctively that this voice has within it the justice of God. I'd like to think of the effect these words have, not within the individuals who read them, real and vital as that is, but on the Churches who hear this great voice speaking, "which made those who hear it beg that no more should be said to them". Because in the end God judges all the ways in which we fall short of his glory, and all these shortcomings are to be made good before the Kingdom can come. The disunity of the Church will be made good too, and it is right that we should think now of how this is

to come about, and what the implications are for us who now constitute one part of the Body of Christ.

Jesus In The Temple

It would have seemed blasphemous, if the followers of Jesus had announced in the Temple that Jesus was of greater significance than that august House of God. Yet that is what we say now. The awful moment in the Passion story, when "the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom" is the moment where the centre of the religious world changes. No longer the courts of the house of the Lord, or the Ark of the Covenant, or the Tent of Meeting: but the sacrificed body of Jesus is now the place where the whole of humanity can come to worship God. In this moment God the Father signifies that the Old Testament has been fulfilled, in its ultimate sacrificial moment: now there is a New Covenant sealed with Christ's blood, and this new Temple will be called *a House of Prayer for all the nations*. Characteristically, it is a moment when barriers between people are crushed beneath the outstretched arm of God. That is the way in which God will save the unity of the Church. We must learn that sloughing of the chrysalis, that popping of the bud, the breaking of the eggshell, that will bring perfection to birth. No-one who understands these processes will mourn over them. Eggshells are splendid; but chickens are better. Grapes are good, but Chassagne-Montrachet is better. We must learn what the Temple is for – and then hand it over to the One who suddenly enters it, resolved as he is to cleanse and re-order, to bring to perfection the religion within it, to throw down the secular and the timebound, and to make room for divine life to be lived. Only then will we lose our impatience and frustration with the Church, and catch a glimpse of its wondrous, God-given beauty, subsuming the beauty and wisdom of all cultures, ways of speech, music and poetry, custom and ceremony. The word "parochial" can be a very limiting and ugly one. The first thing to say about God is that he isn't parochial! Now, "Catholic" is one of the grandest of words. It means "universal": but even that isn't enough for a church that is the body of Christ. Ours is, indeed, a very big Church! *Fr Philip*