

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Kindly Leave This Temple

We don't want your sort in here is for a Christian the very last resort; nevertheless we have been pretty good at saying it. We've said it to people we found differing from us, because we found their morals or beliefs intolerable within the Christian community, because we weren't big enough to understand their response to Jesus, sometimes because we couldn't see beyond our culture or our nationality. And we aren't being original either; because here is the prophet Amos being hurled out of the sanctuary of Bethel (ten miles north of his "proper place" in Jerusalem, and Bethel is in the hands of the northern tribes). Poor Amos had little going for him: a rough diamond, a shepherd from Tekoa south of Jerusalem, an unprepossessing candidate for the job of telling off a crowd of Northern Israelites, let alone a priest. His only excuse is: *I didn't choose this task!* Jesus probably wanted us to have this excuse too: that is why he says at the Last Supper, *You did not choose me. I chose you, and commissioned you to go out and bear fruit that will last.* I'm glad that I don't have to justify my rôle as a priest by any means of my own: I know I couldn't, and that I haven't the least excuse for doing this work, except my belief, reinforced by the Bishop's choice, that God wants me to do it.

A Duty To Speak

But it often falls to us to speak out when we would rather stay silent. Don't think Jesus reserves this job to those well-qualified. If you are there, and something needs to be said, then you are the one God is asking to speak for him. You may make an excuse and leave, and you will evade your task for the moment. But there is a snag: God will hold you responsible for all the evil that comes from your silence. The only way for us to wash the guilt of our generation from our hands is for us to speak out and dissociate ourselves from its sins. When we were baptised, we were anointed with chrism, with the prayer, *As Christ was anointed priest, prophet, and king, may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.* The mention of prophecy is strategic; at our baptism we become people with a vocation to speak for God in the world.

Why does it have to be so hard?

I can't help thinking that good work is always hard. Easy work doesn't move anything forward, or lift anything up, or bring anything to birth. Hard labour isn't an infallible guarantee of goodness, but soft options in hard places mostly suggest a cop-out. The primrose path leads to the everlasting bonfire. But of course prophecy doesn't start with foreigners. It's directed first of all towards the household of faith. It's always confusing and questionable when a member of the family starts to tear up the tarmac on the front drive. But that is what God sometimes asks of us: to speak for him within the Church, to warn the others when they're losing the plot. Within a family it's hard to tell people they are making big mistakes. But who said family life is easy? The theory that our family has to be an inexhaustible well of unconditional approval is much believed: it gives us the father who appears in staff-rooms to punch teachers on the nose for hesitating to praise his charmless offspring.

Salt Of The Earth

Prophets sometimes have to be the salt in the human recipe. It may be a powerful rôle, even an unpopular one. It may result in our being found unacceptable, and our being rejected. If we value acceptance and approval above all else, it isn't possible for us to be prophetic. It would not do for us to assume that our being unloved is down to our prophetic calling! But if it should happen that our fidelity to Christ costs us our comfort, we can remember that he told us it would.

Fr Philip