

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Hating Your Father And Mother

All right, all right. It's wrong! Of course it is. There's misunderstanding buried in the Gospel nearly all the time: what do you expect? We'd misunderstand a note from Julius Caesar to his wife about dinner if we found one. It would be in Latin, and it would probably be couched in a set of sentences whose true meaning could only be known by the pair of them (that is how families get). So we must ask: why do we find Jesus saying these cruel things about family life?

What Is Jesus Talking About?

The first, and most effective answer is: *he isn't talking about family life*. He is talking about our belonging to him and his way to Jerusalem. This path, the pilgrim way, leads to Calvary and the tomb; it is one which our fathers and mothers would never naturally want us to take. When we contemplate Mary in the Stations of the Cross, we are not seeing her as a mother, but as a disciple. As a mother, she would set out to bring him safely home, to save him from the insults and the condemnation. Like Peter she would say, *this must not happen to you*. If she had said that, her Son would have turned on her as he turned on Peter: *Get behind me, Satan!* Fortunately we have no description of such an explosion. The worst that happened was that Mary found herself excluded from his company (Mark 3:31) until she could take her place as a disciple.

Honour Your Father And Your Mother

If I stood up one Sunday and contradicted one of the Ten Commandments, I'd expect the unthinkable to happen, and one of my parishioners to write to the Vatican. Yet it's hard to see how one could properly both honour and hate one's father and mother (I wish some Christians would stop talking about the "plain meaning of the Gospel". I'd defy anyone to think today's bit is in any way "plain" or "simple"). The truth is that values, especially moral values, can be surprisingly relative. Devotion to parents is never an ultimate Christian value, and there may come a time when it must be directly contradicted: for example, if it holds us back from the following of Christ. The lives of the saints often include such direct opposition to their parents, when the child sees the way of Christ more clearly than they do. This is certainly why honouring parents comes in at no.4, and the commandment of obeying the will of God

comes in at no.1; there is no contest, for us, about which takes precedence.

The Word "Hate"

We might be tempted to play down this word in our meditation on the Lord's saying. You can find some scholars who will help you, by telling you that Jesus is just making his point very strongly. Matthew, in the same place, says it more softly: *anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me* sounds a good deal more acceptable. So why does Luke hit us so hard? I note, first of all, that the inclusion of *father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, and your own life too* in the list of hatred makes for a uniquely shocking saying. It's true that such a sophisticated concept as *preferring* does not sit well with the Hebrew mind (though it is perfectly at home in Greek). This implies that Matthew (who isn't a Gentile) is being a bit Greek when he writes this bit of the Gospel, and Luke (who isn't a Jew) is being a bit Hebrew. The truth is that Jesus is far more likely to have said what Luke writes than what Matthew does. He wanted to be as demanding as possible when depicting choices: remember *No man can serve two masters: he will either hate one and love the other, or treat one with respect and the other with scorn. You cannot love both God and money*. I think that all of this is explained when you see his final demand: *Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple*. Even to contemplate the possibility of Calvary, you have to have a decision inside you that cuts like a razor, that divides the truth from the lie, honour from dishonour: an ability to decide and commit which will admit of no compromise whatever. To express this kind of sacrificial self-giving, Luke finds words like "prefer" inadequate. They imply a kind of wavering, vacillating mind which sees both sides of the question, can't quite make up its mind, wants to think about it. As soon as you describe this mind-set in clear terms, you know that Jesus would not have accepted it. Yet it's the classic shape of the human mind in our society, which glories in its capacity to stand on the sidelines, to be agnostic, to decide to wait and see. We fear above all things to be called fanatic, or zealot, or bigot. The Gospel tells us to fear above all things the uncommitted heart, the failure to accept the Gospel. It is a matter of life and death. *Fr Philip*