

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

To The Nations!

The First Reading this Sunday is a very remarkable piece of work. It is by the Second Isaiah (the one who comforted the Exiles in Babylon). It is the first of the four poems called *Servant Songs*. Matthew reminds us of its opening words, in the Voice from Heaven which speaks over the Baptism of Jesus.

Come To Meet My People

If you're married, you might remember the awful day when you first took your beloved home to meet the folks. What would they make of this person? And what would this person make of them? Did you prepare the ground, warning that your mum was OK a bit of an old battle-axe and your dad might come out with anything take no notice we can get away after tea? Or did you go in like a hero, and proudly present the stranger, with the words: *This is the person I love?*

A Solemn Designation

The Bible has a lot of important encounters like that. For instance, the presentation of a new king to the people was solemnized by a ritual in the Temple. We still have the Psalm that was written for that occasion - Ps 2 - and the words of God to the new king are: *You are my Son, today I have become your Father. Ask, and I will give you the nations: I will put the ends of the earth in your possession.* In the history books, we hear God speaking in the mind of the prophet Samuel, when he is wondering which of the sons of Jesse is to be the new King: *Come, anoint him: for this is the One!*

A Bright Frontispiece

Here is the way God does it. Jesus is the Father's gift to the world he has made. This is the day of his solemn inauguration as the Messiah, anointed with the Spirit. God "tears the heavens apart", and the Spirit is seen like a dove descending, and the voice from heaven says: *Here is my Son, the Beloved, on whom my favour rests.* This designates Jesus to us, at the very start of his career, and we are meant to have this warrant of God in our minds for the whole of the story. But to whom does God send his Messiah?

The Chosen People

Of course, God concentrates his mission on his very own people, the Jews. But just a minute. Look again at this astonishing first

reading: three times the Servant of God is told to bring justice *to the nations* - meaning *to the Gentiles*. It is *the islands*, not the Holy Land, who are awaiting his law; his justice will be established *on earth*, and he is appointed by God as *covenant of the people* - the Jews, clearly - *and light of the Gentiles* - that means us. This task of establishing "justice" isn't about improving inter-human relationships: it means bringing people to worship the one and only God: to make them acknowledge that the God of Israel is the One, who deserves the worship of All.

An Ancient Voice

Even for Jesus, Second Isaiah is ancient: he wrote more than 500 years before Jesus was born. In his further songs he develops this rôle of the Servant to address the whole world. God tells him: *It is not enough, for you to serve me, for you to gather the tribes of Jacob and reassemble the survivors of Israel. I shall make you a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.* It is as if the *singleness of the One God* is the secret for the uniting of the earth. Do you see how this ancient prophecy affects us? We have but recently come out of a century dominated by conflict, ending in the titanic collapse of the Soviet Empire. Has this longed-for event made the world safer or happier? Of course not. We'll never find peace through any failure on our part, however massive. The one hope for the world is to find its way to the one God, and to learn how to do his will. To this "justice" God called his Servant. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the rôle in his own life. It remains for the nations to come to worship him.

Jesus Christ Is Lord Of All

Peter, in the middle reading, tells his hearers that the canvas for salvation is no longer a Jewish one. Jesus is for everyone. Catholics know this. There are thousands of religious schemes in the world, but only one which refuses to belong exclusively to any cultural or national community: and that is Catholic Christianity. Founded by an Asian, in the very navel of the human world - the near Middle East - Christ's Church proclaims him throughout the world, and we must rejoice in the borderless, seamless, universal destiny to which he calls us. There is no other name by which we can be saved.

Fr Philip

