

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Following Gods You Have Not Known

The great religious crime for Israel was to worship an alien god. The whole point of being Israel is that Israel is the People of God. But the Promised Land was not an island (a fact we ought to remember often, we who inhabit islands). This meant - and means - that Israel has to preserve itself against invasion: either the hostile kind that brought Syrians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans to take them and tax them, or the more insidious kind that sapped away their special morality, and their holy customs, and their sense of vocation, and threatened to dissolve them into the great world-soup, which they referred to shudderingly as *goyim* - Gentiles.

### The Biblical People

This Chosen Race mentality led to a remarkable history of survival. Abraham lived in the seventeenth century BC, and the Jews are still present on the world scene, despite everything that has been done to harm and obliterate them. It seems quite impossible that they should surrender this sense of exclusive divine favour. But if you read Paul's words to the Romans today, you will see how he extends the reach of God. Now the justice God made known through Law and Prophets (= Jewish religion) has been revealed outside the Law (= to Gentiles) because now the same justice comes to everyone (Jew or Gentile) who believes in Jesus Christ.

### The God Of Jesus

The heart of Jesus' message was that he was specially loved by God, whom he called "my Father". History is littered by monomaniacs proclaiming themselves. People seldom listen to them for very long, because at last they see through lunacy and discard it. Jesus was not like a madman. He was a person of the deepest seriousness, and he shone with an overwhelming and life-giving love, whose power proved itself not only against spiritual evil but actual physical damage and harm, even death itself. People were won, not just by the power of his personality, but by his amazing power to communicate love to others: and this gave credence to his message, even when he shockingly demanded people's whole religious soul, their entire faith, for himself. He was using about himself language they had always reserved only for

God; he demanded an obedience they had only given to God. Look at today's Gospel: *whoever listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be building on rock; whoever listens to these words of mine and does not act on them is heading for ruin.* Forget the common theory that religion takes care of itself, that there's only one God and whatever you happen to believe doesn't matter, because we're all going the same way. Jesus is telling us that there is a judgment coming that will include the possibility of disaster, and that the criterion will be whether people act on his words or not.

### Make Your Mind Up Time

Peter, James and John and their companions all listened to the Sermon on the Mount with their Jewish ears. They must have been as shocked as anyone else to hear the dimension of his claim. But they responded, little by little, until (when Jesus demands that they speak their thoughts) Peter blurts out the remarkable words, *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!* He could never have followed Jesus as a new sort of god; he could only have accepted Jesus as commanding the identical obedience the God of Israel had always commanded. In other words, this Galilean Rabbi who was asking for total trust could do so only because of his closeness to the Most High, blessed be He! - who had always been the God of Israel, and the God of Peter, James, and John.

### The Virtue Of Obedience

Obedience to God is our only salvation; that's what Caiaphas would have said. He would have made it his headline for the condemnation of Jesus. What Peter had understood was that obedience to Jesus was not only *compatible* with "obedience to God", it was identical to it. This recognition of Jesus could only have been born within the ambience of love which the Twelve had experienced. When Jesus told them of the Father's love for him, they listened with awe, and understood the God of their ancestors in a new and most intimate way. That this loving Father-God was the God they had always worshipped remained quite clear to them. Their obedience to Jesus fitted perfectly into place in their Jewish minds and hearts. That is why for all time they will be our teachers in the faith. *Fr Philip*