

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Seventy-Two Others

Some think there are 72, others 70 (old texts differ). Some think Jews believed that there were 70 Gentile nations, and that Luke the Gentile is making Jesus symbolize the future mission to the Gentiles (but as they aren't sent to the Gentiles this doesn't seem to work). In any case, there is no evidence of Jesus going on to visit the 35 or 36 towns they went to; so the story is a rather strange one. Nevertheless, it displays a sudden joyous expansion of the mission of the Twelve, and they set off willingly, and return exultant; Jesus greets them with powerful words of welcome, assuring them that their mission brought Satan tumbling from heaven like lightning, and they now know that his mission makes them proof against all threats and dangers; he assures them that their names are "written in heaven".

The Lord Of The Harvest

This title for God the Father is unique in the New Testament, though it chimes with stories in the parables of Jesus. It is a lovely and very joyous title, and it reminds me of the truth that my work is not for myself, and anything I might achieve in doing it is not for my sake. The harvest we work for is God's harvest, not ours. If we bring in a rather strange-looking set of crops, that is God's business, not ours. In the weekday readings recently, this theme has returned again and again: that the life we find ourselves living is not to be judged by us, but by God. If we think what we do in holy obedience is wasted work, or is not having results we can be proud of, we have a tendency to rebel, and to ask for something more appealing, in which we take "job satisfaction". It sounds good, but it doesn't match the Gospel - or even the Old Testament. There we find a constant theme of discontent among the prophets and the servants of God in general. Sometimes they have been faithful, but still say: *I have exhausted myself for nothing*. Jesus says stern words to us about this: *When you have done everything you have been told to do, say: We are only servants; we have done no more than our duty*. Personally I wish I could say as much as that; but I keep hearing those evangelical counsels cutting into my self-satisfaction: *sell everything and give to the poor: be kind to your enemies, pray for those who afflict you: if your eye leads you to sin, tear it out: do not look back once you have*

laid your hand on the plough....and many other tough sayings that leave me dead in the water, without a prayer. I wonder how I shall be judged by "the Lord of the Harvest"!

God Knows Our Hearts

The truth is that it may be in the unconsidered trifles (as we see them) that our salvation may lie hidden. We think of the things that look good to us in our judgment, and hope they look good to God the Father. Perhaps they do; but God has a way of differing from us. It may be in some tough corner of our life-story, in an area where we are slightly ashamed of ourselves, in some obscure place, that we did something or said something which made a real opening in our life or someone else's life, through which God was able to enter the world. In thirty-three years of work as a priest, I'm always surprised by the things people remember about my humble ministry. Embarrassingly it's never anything I can recall at all. It's something I've completely forgotten I did or said, and it made a difference to someone else's life or faith. Thank God for that, and don't ask what good the rest of it did! You don't want to know!

These Nameless Apostles

So these seventy-two others - none of whom has a name or a personality that's been remembered - are a great consolation to us who toil in the vineyard never quite knowing what fruit we're generating. Haloes and certificates aren't the point. The missionaries went out without wealth or comfort, and perhaps they felt cold and fearful when they reached their destinations. But they were welcomed, and they found to their amazement and joy that they could impart peace and victory to people, by teaching them Christ's name and gospel. I think I could claim to have had the same experience on a regular basis, and I thank God for it. But as for weighing anything that has happened through us as if we could see it through the eyes of God, that's beyond our power. St Paul says that the value of a person who lives in the Spirit is not to be judged by anyone but God; and when he adds *I will not even pass judgment on myself*, he is guiding us to a salutary psychological principle: leave God to judge your life! He excels in all things, and that includes mercy!

Fr Philip