

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Not Peace, But Division

Today's Gospel is somewhat strange. When Luke's angels sang over Bethlehem it was *Peace on earth, goodwill towards men*. Now Jesus says he has not come to bring peace on earth, but division; and he speaks of the intimate sanctuary of the family as the place where the blade will divide.

Fights In The Family

Are we uniquely cursed with family troubles today? I don't think so. This is a story as old as humanity: it is always a problem when people are sharing space. Sadly we don't seem to learn much across the generations; our century knows just as much about family discord as any previous one. But conditions are different. Nowadays we have gone for the welfare of the individual as the template for action. If someone is unhappy in the family, our attitude is *Get them out!* - and they are getting out in hordes. Homeless children think they can make it alone in a big city, because they find life at home "impossible"; is what they suffer at home really so much worse than what they find on the streets? Of course there are situations of appalling abuse to be cited. But in the main I would guess that most Victorian children lived much worse. Our readiness to divorce is appalling, and we must suspect that many marriages are cast aside too readily, for reasons which say more about the weak understanding of the partners than about the impossibility of the union they have deserted. The prevailing climate seems to be: *if life together seems to have problems, let's live apart!* Then we have to find ways to support this decision financially, trying all the while to pretend that we know how to support it emotionally and socially. Children are habitually innocent victims. The damage they sustain, I believe, is incalculable, and if (as they feel they must) they bottle it up and present a smooth façade, it lies buried for decades, perhaps for life.

What Does Jesus Mean?

The division Jesus proclaims is not this cold, bitter reality. It is the division between what is God's Kingdom and what isn't. *You cannot serve two masters*, he tells us. And if the vital truth of the Kingdom of God divides us on earth, what is happening is a judgment which will affect every single member of the human race. It's dramatised in the famous image from Mt 25, where the Judge assembles

humanity and divides it, sheep from goats. But it has already begun in reality, as God's people find they can't mix it with active evil. In Roman times, when this Gospel was written down, the Empire was a tight ship, where pagan religion, military power, and Roman Law were closely bound together, in a prevailing culture where wealth and violence made criminality a fact of ordinary life. To become a Christian in those times closed down many of the ways people lived. Certainly it would have been nearly impossible for a faithful Christian to advance or acquire influence in the Roman world. That the Church survived at all is a matter of wonder.

What Price Peace?

So how much could a Christian accept in the struggle to keep the peace? Many a Roman marriage foundered when a wife converted to Christianity, and found herself unable to live with the life her husband led. Many a child faced separation and hatred from parents and siblings, because of Christian faith. How would a Jewish family react after AD70, on hearing that their son wanted to leave behind the daily rules and rituals of his forefathers, and join this mongrel religion with a crucified criminal as its icon?

Peace In Heaven

Twenty centuries on, I think we should take care of the Sign of Peace at Mass. We sometimes treat it as a social occasion, and start little conversations about health or holidays or bits of news. But "the peace of Christ" is no earthly matiness. We're talking about the peace between the Father and the Son, that love we call "the Holy Spirit", which outbids and relativises any earthly relationship *or dislike*. This is a sacramental power which we have to share. It's deeply linked with Holy Communion itself; and that is *not* based on earthly friendship, but on the Holy Trinity itself, as a template for the human family. When we sit with our friends in church, and go out together at the end, we are preventing this plan of God from being revealed. The sign of peace is our recognition, not of earthly friendship, but of that mysterious kinship with others which is made in God's mind, not ours. If our families learn this, we shall find them enduring with God's eternity.

Fr Philip