

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Only One Has Returned

The cure of the ten lepers (aka *sufferers from a virulent skin disease* in politically correct terms; a shame PC is always so expansive - we'll drown in it) is doubtless a cause of great joy for all of them. Nine go to Jerusalem to keep the Law for declaring one's healing; clearly observant Jews. The other comes back to Jesus simply to give thanks, because he is a Samaritan and has no Temple to go to. All of them went to give thanks: this is not a Gospel about gratitude. But only one of them came to *Jesus* with his thanks.

### Religion Can Get In Our Way

It would be very wrong for us to miss one of the points St Luke constantly makes in his Gospel; that being religious can be an absolute blight on people's lives. It really isn't true that *any* religion is better than *no* religion. Some systems of religion are so wrong-headed and (I'm afraid) sick at heart that people would honestly be better without them. Luke tells us of a priest and a Levite - up to their necks in religion - who passed by on the other side when they saw a man half-dead by the roadside. They didn't know whether he was dead or not; they weren't going to risk touching a corpse - which would have put them out of their religious business for some time; so they lost the opportunity of saving the life of a living brother. Their religion was more important than their goodness and humanity. Today a man who was deficient in religion comes to Jesus with his gratitude because he was *free* to sense the holiness of his encounter with the Lord.

### Matthew And The Pharisees

Jesus is depicted in Matthew as delivering huge denunciations of false religion - anxious about rule-keeping, but able to smash through the demands of kindness and sympathy. I don't believe Jesus could have said these terrible things to the Pharisees, though he might well have said them to all of us in general, and Matthew hung them on the Pharisees because by the time he was writing they were his enemies. Hypocrisy, heartlessness, jealousy - all quite compatible, I fear, with industrious religion: and all quite lethal to the real experience of God's love.

### John's Gospel

The fourth Gospel was written when relations with the Jews had completely broken down.

His depiction of the High Priest leading the Sanhedrin in hatred of Jesus, and the calm decision to work for his death so that the Romans would not demolish the Temple as a nest of sedition and treachery. Once again, the structure of religion seen as more important than the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is cruel, but it does represent some of the truth about why he was rejected, and therefore why he was killed.

### Religion Involves The Heart

When people say that religion is the cause of all wars, they are confusing something important. Religion is the flag of my soul: my religion involves the whole of me. So do quite a few other things: my family, my way of life, my home. When such things are threatened, I can go to war; and my religion will not stand idly by when I do it. But that doesn't mean that my religion dictated that I should fight for what is dearest and most precious to me. People who think such things are delighted to throw away the whole project of religion, seeing it as a dangerous area and therefore one to be avoided. But that impedes our full involvement with life. We are prevented from giving our whole self if we never find something which unites us, spirit, heart, and body. That our country has thrown away its ancient faith is responsible for its decay as a country: its laws less and less effective, its people less and less united, its streets and cities less and less safe. It is true that the Christian faith had become for many people something sclerotic and bloodless, defiled by class division, sullied by hypocrisy. In many ways the religion had become the enemy of faith, hope, and love.

### The Tenth Leper

I think of the Samaritan who was cured with great affection. He is so much not a Jew, that he is almost ready to become a Christian. His poverty, cut off from others, and condemned to watch his slow and awful death, disposes us to him already. But his being an outsider - dear to Luke the Gentile - and his heartfelt seeking-out of Jesus in gratitude and awe, makes him a figure of great beauty. I hope that we shall be able to proclaim a Christian faith that isn't cluttered by any of the vile misunderstandings of the past, and let people see the wonder and glory that makes ordinary people become saints. *Fr Philip*