

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“My Word Is Not My Own”

We say something like this from time to time: usually it's when we are refusing responsibility for a hard saying we've been charged to carry to someone else; *it's not my fault*, we say, *I don't make the rules, don't shoot the messenger* and so on. Inevitably we are distancing ourselves from the message we carry by this sort of statement. We dissociate ourselves from what we are saying. That certainly isn't the way Jesus wants to be understood. There is a whole range of his statements that we need to take together in order to catch his real drift.

“The Father Is Greater Than I.”

We are taught that in the Holy Trinity the three Persons are equal *but not identical*. For Jesus to say that the Father is *greater* than he is, then, is mysterious. It *might* have to do with his earthly situation, where he is said to have *emptied himself of equality with God, and become what we are* (Phil 2:7); the letter to the Hebrews says Christ was *for a short while made lower than the angels* (Heb 2:9) and that *although he was Son, he learned obedience through his sufferings, until he was perfected, and became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation* (Heb 5:8); in other words, to be our Saviour, Jesus had to learn, and grow, and submit. In the mystery of his obedience, he expresses his “sonship” of the Father, and so his life on earth is a witness to the greatness of the Father. But I can't help feeling there is something more here: a Son is *always* subordinate to his Father, and Jesus would never have chosen these two words without intending that implication. The equality remains: but within the overall picture of a father-son relationship.

“The Will Of The One Who Sent Me”

Jesus does not come to do his own will, but the will of the one who sent him. That does not mean that Jesus had an *alternative* plan, which he throws away in favour of the plan of the Father. It means that the source of the plan he follows is entirely divine, and not something which is being designed “on the hoof” as Jesus' life unfolds. It is as if he is telling us that we should give him our whole attention, because what he does is a display of the power of God. As when he says *I have*

come down from heaven, this message is not easy for people to accept. They are not expecting a country carpenter to claim such a mandate.

The Word Was Made Flesh

John's Gospel begins with the identification of Jesus as the Word of the Father. When I speak a word, if I am speaking properly, I can say that my word is truly representing me. Yet words have an independent life of their own. I have often found what I said being misunderstood, so that a wrong meaning is received by a listener. And most of us have had the experience of “our words coming back to haunt us”, where the fact of our speaking certain words becomes portentous of something in the future which we neither knew nor intended. For the Father, there are no mistakes. His word is eternal, and perfectly expresses his meaning; the Father can truly say of the promises in the Gospel, “I give you my word”. As Jesus lives out his mission, it is not himself that he is promoting or proclaiming, but the Father who sent him: he comes as the Father's word. He does not err in representing the Father (thus the theme of *equality*) and all that he does reinforces the message, and makes it *happen* in the sight of the world. This is the meaning of *incarnation*: the word becomes flesh. The humility of Jesus as he incarnates the divine word is the mark of his servanthood, his subjection. Thus his subservience to the will of the Father is entirely worthy of a divine person, as all love involves the same kind of obedience, the forgetting of self-centred prerogatives in favour of the one we love. Love is always the key to the understanding of Jesus.

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