

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A New and Greater Moses

When Matthew wrote his Gospel for the very Jewish church in which he lived, he wanted to model the picture of Jesus on someone his readers would recognise and revere. Of all human beings, the Jews had the most reverence for Moses, the Lawgiver, who had spoken with God and seen God.

Moses and Pharaoh

At his birth Moses was already Pharaoh's enemy, Pharaoh having decreed that all Hebrew boys must be killed at birth. God's task for Moses was to deliver his people from the hand of Pharaoh, to lead them out of slavery, to cross the desert at their head, and to bring them to the Land of Promise. Through all of this he would form and protect their faith in God, teaching them faithfully what God wanted them to learn and accept. His greatest act of teaching was the moment when he came down Mt Sinai with the Tablets of the Law, bearing the commandments of God. Moses was Liberator, General, Teacher, Prophet, and Legislator; he was the one who stood before God to speak for the people. For Pharaoh he was a fearsome figure, a bringer of plague, disaster, and death.

Jesus and Herod

Matthew starts his story of Jesus with the same picture of a wicked king – not Pharaoh this time, but Herod - decreeing the death of Hebrew children. Among the Evangelists Matthew alone shows us Jesus taking refuge in Egypt; this is meant to remind us of Moses, on whom Matthew's picture of Jesus is based. In today's Gospel we find the great theme of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus stands on the mountain to deliver a new covenant, to demand a renewed obedience to the voice of God. He reminds us of the Ten Commandments we have already received, and then he asks of us a deeper and more perfect obedience to their spirit.

Moses' People

The people Moses had to lead were pretty rough material: slaves - and the sons and daughters of slaves. Moses had to eradicate from their hearts – even their bloodstream - the slavish responses and attitudes they had been taught. The sacraments of this learning

were to be the Journey, the Law, and the Promised Land itself when they arrived in it. Freedom does not come easily to a slave. I met an old man who had been in prison so long that he couldn't bear to be released. He used to buzz a brick through the window of the Police Station and get himself arrested again, thankful to be back in the familiar confines of his cell, the only place where he knew how to live.

Jesus' People

How do we respond to the Gospel today? Here is a holiness that is not implanted in our nature, but which takes us beyond ourselves: deep, and demanding: not an external obedience to rules, but a thoroughgoing integrity that beats in the heart. Jesus isn't telling us just to behave well. He is telling us to be *perfect*, and that is awesome. It demands a greater conversion than the one Moses' people faced. How do we realistically accept such a programme, knowing ourselves as we do? Like the Hebrews, *we need a sacrament* - a gift that will give us hope, something to hold onto that says: "It's possible!". This, God has given. Our Sacrament is Jesus himself, like us in all things *except sin*. His presence to us, in other people, in the Church and its ministry, in the Gospel, in the liturgy, in our growing understanding of him, our receiving of him into our messy and disintegrated hearts, is the great truth that will mend our nature, and heal all its wounds. He tells us today of the integrity we can hope for. As the Gospel unfolds for us, he will teach us to believe that the ideal may take flesh.

Fr Philip