

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Appropriate Behaviour

There have been many responses to the promise that Christ is to come again to judge the world. Some of them are appropriate and some are not; even in the New Testament we can see various attitudes.

Jerusalem's Response

In Jerusalem the early church saw itself awaiting imminent apocalypse. At any moment, the first Christians thought, Jesus may return. What followed was one of the formative times in Christian experience; three times the *Acts of the Apostles* takes time to marvel at the degree of unity and generosity which swept through the Church. *See how these Christians love one another!* They declared the oncoming end of the world with a kind of joyous liberation; they pooled their resources in a huge act of communism which seems to have been entirely historical, not a pious legend. Certainly the faith of that first Church was overwhelmingly realistic; people cancelled their securities and liquidised their assets in the name of the Second Coming.

C'est Magnifique, Mais....

The big *but...* was embarrassingly quick to appear. By the time Paul was writing to his Churches, the money had run out, and the Lord had still not returned. The Jerusalemites had got it right in spirit, but wrong in practicalities. We find Paul limiting damage, urging his Churches to go on working at their jobs quietly, keeping themselves secure without investing their hopes in worldly things; and then the beautiful and gracious response was evolved of the collection for Jerusalem, to replace in the purse of the Christians of Jerusalem what they had themselves so willingly shared with one another in the first Church. In this way the whole Church came together in responsibility for the suffering parts, and the consolation of Jerusalem gave gladness to all.

Living In Fear

In the cruel world after the fall of the Roman Empire, fear was a great element in most people's lives. The vast majority of the lands the Romans had conquered used to count their blessings. Maybe they were taxed, and had lost some freedom of independent action, but many of them were not gifted with a powerful national identity to make them feel vanquished. What the Romans gave in return was considerable: trade, roads, supplies, and above all, law and order, and a protection against one's enemies which seemed invincible. The dreadful barbarian war-lords - Genseric, Totila, Alaric, Attila - were a different matter, their coming was a frightful experience of pillage and destruction. No wonder the word "King"

became invested, not with the peaceful halo of David, shepherd of his people, but with the aura of violence and terror. The Last Judgment lost its meaning as vindication, the ultimate victory of peace and justice, and became a scene of smoking disaster, where the people of God were themselves most vulnerable under the stern gaze of a god whose patience was finally exhausted. The Old Testament is easily misrepresented by careless reading, and the message of divine tenderness which it contains can be made to breathe constant threats and menaces - because the Old Testament is, indeed, full of God's warnings to the ungodly. If you forget the love of God for the poor, the failed, the oppressed, then the Bible can be an arsenal for the ammunition of fear.

The Reality of Thomas

Thomas is a voice asking for *proof*: but it isn't a scientific proof that he demands. The word "proof" comes to us from the French word for "experience". Thomas is asking for an experience like the one that his fellows have had. He puts this in plain, crude terms: *my finger into the holes made by the nails* - and he does not mind reminding his friends what they all saw from afar: *my hand into the hole in his side*. This is hard-hitting, upsetting language, designed to bring them down to earth, back to reality: much as the Jerusalem Church came down to earth when it ran out of money, and had to find some way of paying the bills. Indeed, redemption doesn't whisk you away from the world, into a celestial realm where the tough facts of life no longer apply. That would be a stupid way of understanding the fact, so wonderfully expressed at the beginning of the Gospel: *The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*. Jesus was not nailed to the cross in order to tell us that earthly realities don't matter. No: there are many signs of salvation that we yet owe to the world: Mark's risen Lord tells us what they are: *in my name you will cast out devils, have and use the gift of tongues, take up serpents in your hands, and absorb deadly poison without harm. You will lay your hands on the sick, and they will recover*. So be it. In us let the will of God be done, on earth as it is in heaven!
Fr Philip

