

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What If They Won't Listen?

From the earliest preaching of the Gospel it has divided its hearers into two: those who hear and welcome it, and those who don't. Christians have needed to know what to do when the Gospel goes unwelcomed. We have many stories to tell.

Shall We Call Down Fire?

The Spanish Inquisition Manual of Gospel Proclamation was not the first to extol the positive effects of conflagration. The sons of thunder (James and John) suggest this response when a Samaritan village, hearing that Jesus and his friends are *en route* for Jerusalem, refuse them hospitality. The Gospel depicts them as offering to pray for a miracle; they might, of course, simply be offering to set fire to a few hayricks. Jesus chalks them off, and the matter is closed. In today's Gospel, we hear from the Master our instructions as to our response to unbelief: *Shake off the dust from your feet as a sign to them.* The gesture was the way in which observant Jews marked their crossing from the pagan world into the Promised Land; the sign said, *We accept your verdict. This place is now part of the pagan world, and we're out of it.* Later Gospels add the threatening prediction, *It will go harder with that town on Judgment Day, than with Sodom and Gomorrah.*

Let Me Put It Another Way

We are not the first to suffer agonies of doubt about our way of preaching the Gospel. We are likely to think the best of ourselves if the churches are full, if there is respect and honour for our leaders, if the press find us worthy of praise. We are equally downhearted if the congregations are small, if the world has little time for our concerns, if there is public abuse and mockery for the Church. We must have got it wrong, we say. We'll have to change our message. But we are quite wrong to think in this way. It is not Joe and Jane Public or their offspring that we are here to obey. We could take a referendum on what will please them, and avoid all that doesn't turn them on. But we'll never preach the Gospel like that, because the Gospel ends with a lonely condemned man for whom *no-one* has a good word - not even those who are crucified with him. He didn't get where he is now by saying what his hearers wanted him to say. We must have the thoughts of God, not the longings or hatreds of humans, at the centre of our message; and

sometimes the Word of God is simply too hard to sell. That's not an invitation to shelve it. I'd like to hear some of these tele-evangelists say: *There must be something wrong, we're not getting crucified!*

The Glory On The Face of Christ

We'd like to believe that if we, the Church, reflect the true glory of Christ, all humanity will be united with us in him. The evidence is otherwise. Not only did humanity *not* cave in before him, but it crucified him: and *that – rather than the day when everyone was speaking well of him – was the Day of Redemption!* Our fate will not be much different. We do not respond with fire, or any other persecution. The Gospel allows us only that small gesture of separation - the shaking of dust as we depart. Hidden in that sign is all the future judgment which will afflict the world that refuses Christ. Our duty is to present him, as best we may, in all his fulness, to the people about us. We shall often fail, confusing our message with his, getting in the way of his Good News with our Bad News, distorting and hiding; and when this happens, we shall be partly responsible for the peril of others. But even Jesus himself did not convert all who met him. The likelihood is that there will always be many refuseniks. We do not help them by trying to tailor the Gospel: only by giving it in its purity, with whole hearts. After that, their fate is with God the merciful, the almighty.

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