

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I Am The Bread Of Life

You could never accuse Jesus of claiming a modest, tentative place in the attention of the world. How totally he differs from the leaders of our day! No wonder people said of him, *He speaks with authority, not like the scribes*. No-one has ever spoken like him, without being manifestly deranged; and Jesus is not deranged; he is imperturbably controlled and measured in his demeanour and his relating to others.

“I AM!”

This thunderous verb is the name of God as Moses heard it at the Burning Bush. Jesus incorporates it solemnly in his preaching, and several times in his address to others. We are familiar with the sermons of the Fourth Gospel where he says *I am the Good Shepherd / the Resurrection / the Light of the World / the Vine / the Way, Truth and Life* and so on. We should also note those moments where he says it solemnly, and without a predicate: as he walks on the water, *Fear not! It is I* – literally, *I AM*; in the garden, when the soldiers say they seek Jesus of Nazareth, *I am he* – literally, *I AM*; and in his bitterest argument with Jews, *Before Abraham ever was, I AM* – at which, unable to misunderstand, *they picked up stones to stone him with*. It is unthinkable for a Jewish teacher to proclaim *himself* rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But that is what Jesus does in the Fourth Gospel; and the implication is clear: from now on, Jesus claims to be the heart of religion or (plainly) *God*; and the verdict we pass on him will judge us too.

The Force of Tradition

We Catholics have an honour for tradition which makes us unique in the Christian world. It seems to me to be absolutely necessary. When we read the Gospels, we are taking what they say on trust. Listening to some believers, you would think that the presence of this or that statement in the Gospels absolves us of the necessity to trust other flesh-and-blood people – as if the Word of God came floating down out of heaven with the Angelic Certificate of Authenticity fluttering authoritatively from its silk bookmarks. Do they not realise that *the Gospels are books written by human beings* in the first century? When you receive them as the Word of God, you are *trusting* those people to have received the truth, and to have transmitted it faithfully, *because the Church*

says so. That is all we say about tradition as a whole. We have to trust the tradition when it says Jesus was truly a sane, convincing, enormously authoritative person, and that he really did make the huge claims for himself that the Gospels say. When (on Sunday, for instance) you say *I believe*, you are accepting the truthfulness of the Christian tradition, of which the Church is guardian.

What The Church Guards

The task of the Church is to deliver the Gospel in every generation until Christ comes. This Gospel is the bread of life in every age, the *food that endures to eternal life*. Each Christian has a rôle to play in this “sowing of the seed”; and in relation to today’s Gospel it is, first of all, to make the Gospel our Bread of Life, by praying it into our hearts and minds, living it, and growing to be like the one who feeds us; and secondly by taking responsibility for the feeding of others in any way that we can. This isn’t a matter of Bible-punching on Lister-gate, which seems only to frighten the horses. It is a question of being ready, when those around us are open to it or in need of it, to offer the hope and promise of the Gospel. There are times when there will be no-one to do the work of Christ except you. If you have made the Gospel your own, you will be giving the greatest of all possible gifts. But you will never be able to do this dishonestly. We can only offer others the Gospel by which we ourselves are living, saying: I believe this. *Fr Philip*