

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Enter The Church

It was always going to happen that the question would be asked, "Is a Christian a sort of Jew?" It was a hard question to answer at first. True, the Founder himself was thoroughly Jewish, spoke to Jews, chose Jews to be his lieutenants, and lived a life totally in accord with the Law of Moses. But there was a constant tendency in his thinking about the Gentiles, which was not quite in accord with the Jewish thought of his day. True, it is also present in the Scriptures - especially in the Prophets: the thought that the Maker of the Jews has designs for his Gentile peoples too. But a far stronger feeling for most Jews was that *Gentile* equals *evil*, and that the less you tangled with them, the more you were a good Jew. In the writings of Luke we see holes being shot in this sea-wall, as the tide of the Gentiles' faith irrupts into the Church; their abundant goodwill and obedience providing instant and uncontrovertible evidence: *Barnabas went to Antioch...he was delighted to see for himself that God had given grace...the Church gave glory to God, saying, "God can evidently give to the Gentiles too the repentance that leads to life."*

New Jerusalem

Sometimes Jerusalem means fallen humanity, ruined by its imprisonment in self; sometimes - as here - it means a humanity recreated, "coming down from God out of heaven", resplendent in faithful reflection of its Maker. The Church too is often darkened by our sad tendency to "think in man's way, not God's"; we muddy and obfuscate the proper glory of the Church - which belongs to God alone - by trying to gild the divine lily. A short meditation on the lilies of the fields, conducted in (say) St Peter's Basilica, would make the point clearly. Does all that fairground gilding really reflect anything except the seventeenth century's obsession with earthly power? Even as I ask that, I have to remember the countless faces of poor and simple people I have seen who can stand in those vast spaces in a rapt faith and love for God. But the new Jerusalem will not need to be built of earthly glory, but will have *all the radiant glory of God*. That, as the crucified Jesus taught us, shines best where there is no admixture of earthly power or wealth.

The Holy Spirit

As if to reinforce the superhuman scale of the Redemption, Luke couples its advent with the detonation of the earthly bounds of the Chosen People. No earthly policy admitted Gentiles to the body of Christ; it was the Holy Spirit who ordained that the Gentiles should be welcomed *without*

keeping the Law of Moses, with its rituals and cultural legacy, its food rules and sacrificial obligations. The Temple itself was represented as superseded: the tradition of the tearing of the Temple veil called the first Christians to fix their eyes on the crucified Christ, whose sacrifice would fulfil and abolish all the Temple sacrifices.

All I Have Said To You

The work of the Spirit is to teach us all things, and to remind us of all Jesus said to us. This "reminding" is not a simple matter of remembrance, but the unlocking of meaning too. Being mindful of Jesus is not like the remembrance of some long-dead teacher of wisdom. It is the recalling of the Resurrection, and the coming to understand for the first time what it means for the world. This has to be the most creative and life-giving process: the bringing of dead realities out into the Easter light. All that is moribund, all that smells of slavery, will perish in this encounter, so that what survives may be raised incorruptible, and shine like the apocalyptic diamond, crystal-clear. This is the frame in which the Catholic church should rightly be understood: as the guardian, not of dead rules from the past, but of a living encounter with the Lord of past, present, and future. In the Eucharist we hold a treasure of unearthly scope and value, the key of eternal life. What sort of life should we be living, who hold it in our hands and feed on it? How can we embody in our temporal lives so great a divine power?

Fr Philip