

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 in terms of imminent apocalypse. At any moment, thought the first Christians, 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 arise. 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 their purse what they had themselves so willingly shared at first. 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 freedom of action, but many of them were not gifted with a powerful national identity to make them feel vanquished. What the Romans gave 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 a goldmine for the ammunition of fear.

Come And Set Us Free

We should keep sharp and pure our belief that there is a genuine, palpable, electable difference between good and evil: that it is always possible to love goodness and to hate evil, if only we can see them as they are. In such a state of affairs we can believe that we may have nothing to fear from a just judgment declared with power, since nothing deserving of the name of goodness can be lost, and nothing deserving of the name of evil will survive; we have been taught that we are beloved by God, and have received the most cogent proof that it is so; we believe that God is faithful, and does not turn his back on anything he has made. We can pray with confidence: "Thy will be done on earth!"

Fr Philip