

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Law

Hearing of *the Law of Moses* we perhaps summon up the great set-piece description of Moses on Sinai, with a great storm-cloud thundering, and the fire of God etching his word into the stone tablets, and his fearsome voice embedding it into the minds of his hearers *until they begged that no more should be said to them*. Or perhaps we think of the austere purity of the ten commandments, and their inexorable reminder, *I AM THE LORD!* to fix each demand in place with full authority. When Ezra the Scribe ascended his dais in front of the Water Gate, and read from the book of the Law he was not, we can be sure, simply quoting Leviticus on the correct disposition of cooking pots. I think the words which made the people listen in rapt attention from early morning until noon were the *stories* of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob called Israel, and the sons of Israel who are the fathers of the twelve tribes. It is the story of the people in Egypt, and of Moses who brought them out for God, that is the heart of the Law, and not any series of regulations. "Torah" - *the Law* - for Jews meant the five books of Moses; and the favourite parts of them has always been the stories of the Patriarchs.

The Law and the Prophets

This ancient phrase for the Scriptures gives us a way in to today's liturgy. Ezra read the Law to the people; Jesus read from the Prophets in the synagogue at Nazara, where he had been brought up. In both cases, what the people found moving was the sense that they were hearing words in a new way, words which explained their own experiences, words addressed to them. This is what is meant by *the fulfilment of the Word of God*. The Law was being fulfilled in Ezra's Jerusalem, as the people heard the story which had led them to be planted in the City, where they had now returned, and to possess the Temple, before whose ruins they were now gathered. In the ancient words of the Bible they heard the promises in which their fathers had hoped, and a divine mandate for their own future. For Jesus' audience too, there was only one message, one phrase of commentary on the promise of a Messiah which had always stood in the prophecy: *This text is being fulfilled today, even as you listen*. What had been a *text* - words on a page - is becoming a *word* - a message with

personal meaning, a live Gospel. The Christ is here.

The Word becomes flesh

The sentence that underpins the Old Testament - *I am the Lord* - is echoed in the Gospel by Jesus, when he says *I am the bread of life, I am the way, I am the Resurrection*. These are all from John's Gospel; but today's phrase is similar, *This is being fulfilled now*. Jesus is claiming to embody in himself the ancient message he reads out from the Bible - *even as you listen*. So the message of the Scripture at Mass today is actually an illumination of listening to the Bible itself. When we hear the Scripture in church, we do not hear a dead letter from a forgotten past. We hear a word that is fulfilled *even as we listen to it*; our very hearing of the Word is the moment when it can come true. When we speak of the Real Presence of Jesus, we should not simply think of the moment of Holy Communion, when Christ is one with all who receive him: but also of the moment when the Word of God enters us, and we respond with the personal involvement shown by the listeners in the readings today.

Our Evangelist This Year

Luke's Gospel begins with an old man listening to an angel with some measure of disbelief; the people of Nazara are, in the end, equally sceptical about Jesus. But the Gospel ends with two disciples on their way to Emmaus, whose journey is mysteriously accompanied, and whose hearts burn within them as Jesus opens to them the Scriptures. Our way lies beside them in this Lukan year. May we listen, and receive the Word as it is spoken to us! When we listen to Luke, may we hear for ourselves the living word of a Gospel which has been spoken for no earthly motive, but for the Word who is made flesh. Let Luke be our guide to Christ in our liturgies, throughout the Prayer of this year.

Fr Philip