

I'm Hurt

It frequently happens that the life we lead in the Christian Church falls very far short of the depth and quality we would wish. In our creeds and our Scriptures we talk about divine perfection and high morality, 'charity and pardon; in our actual experience we find ourselves looking embarrassingly similar to the people who profess no faith and perhaps few ideals, but quietly get on with their lives, doing their best day by day.

Self-righteousness

Christians have no cause for complacency. Once baptised, you're marked out for a life which is beyond human achievement. If you don't spend the rest of your life praying for the grace of God, you're a lost cause! I think that we should also become incapable of self-righteousness, unless we want to be ridiculed; speaking personally, I know my life would stand up very poorly to a quite ordinary human scrutiny, so with St Paul I can say: *I have nothing to boast about to God.*

Being Offended

So we should be careful about taking offence at others. The Scripture this Sunday talks about a formal procedure for dealing with sin or offence within the Church. Jesus lays down principles which closely mirror those in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. This reminds us that the Church, like Israel, has to be a good human community, in which the human needs for justice and trust, honesty and sensitivity, have to be met first, before we can begin to seek the divine gifts which make us the People of God. It is no use relying on God's grace before we have spent our whole store of human strength in seeking those qualities. God will always supply our real needs; but he asks us to put all our resources into the Christian life first. So what happens when we have to accept bad treatment from a fellow-Christian? I'm talking about real difficulties -not just the little frictions of every day, but the discovery that my brother or sister in the faith is damaging my life, hindering my own ability to respond to the Gospel. It is perfectly possible for there to be such

moments in the Church's life. We must learn how the Lord wants us to react.

The Church Is Christ's Body

The first avenue is an inter-personal one; we should be able to speak to each other, heart to heart; and this should be enough to solve most problems. It should be an act of faith for us that people of good will can sort out their difficulties together. How often a happy resolution found in this way can strengthen and deepen the bonds between us! Happy marriages are not the mythical ones where there are no problems, but ones where the problems are faced together, so that the solving of them together can strengthen the unity of the couple. If that fails, because someone is refusing to listen, then there should be a discreet widening of the forum -"take one or two others along with you". This is a situation that is becoming more delicate: such moments do not benefit from airing in public. If this too fails, then it becomes a community issue. How this added seriousness was intended to be expressed in the beginning is unclear. We have no modern custom of the Church's meeting to unwrap a quarrel or settle a dispute (and I can't say I'm sorry!). Again it seems to reflect the Jewish world in which Deuteronomy was written. However, at the end of the line, if an offending party refuses to listen to the Church, he or she is to be *treated as a pagan or a tax-collector*: that is, excommunicated. Few people will like to hear that excommunication, which evokes the Spanish Inquisition, is in fact a concept from the Lord speaking in the Gospel. Our reading today repeats the words to Peter about the power to bind and loose in the name of heaven. We should make very sure that our marking of others' offences is reserved for those times when it is a matter of life and death: is my quarrel excommunication stuff?
Fr Philip