

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Tax Collectors and Sinners

This is a really important Gospel. We'll have serious questions to ask when we've understood it.

Jesus and the Pharisees

If you read the Sermon on the Mount, eliminating the disparaging references to Pharisees, you'll actually hear nothing that a *good* Pharisee could have disliked. They were a moralistic bunch, and anyone calling them to a harder path would generally have found a welcome. What upset the apple-cart between Jesus and the Pharisees was precisely the sort of story we read in today's Gospel: Jesus called a tax-collector to be his follower, and then threw a party to which he invited not only the tax-collector, but a crowd of *sinners*. Real live sinners.

Pharisees

The Pharisees thought the best response to an evil world was to *separate yourself from it*. They rigorously divided their lives from anything or anyone they felt might carry pollution into their aseptic space, in which they lived a life punctuated by ritual washings and other rites of purification - which they took seriously. These practices stood between them and the invasive power of the evil and foreign world, inhabited by Gentiles, sinners, idol-worshippers, all those who rejected the Covenant and forfeited their share in the promises to Israel.

Jesus

What Jesus did was made very clear to us in the Fourth Gospel, read through the latter parts of Lent, in Holy Week, and throughout Eastertide: he stopped talking about the unnameable God in hushed tones, and demanded people's whole allegiance *to himself*. He said, in effect: *If you want to inherit the promises of God, you must accept ME as you accept God*. It is always supposed that this is a theme of the Fourth Gospel; but look again at today's reading from Matthew. What is Jesus doing here? He is driving a coach-and-horses through the Pharisees' precious *cordon sanitaire*.

Sinners

Not only does he call a blatant tool of the Gentile Empire - a tax-gatherer - to be his companion: he goes on to assemble a whole houseful of public sinners and share with them the intimacy of his table. At the beginning of this chapter (Mt 9) his

initial response to a paralysed man was: *Cheer up, my son, your sins are forgiven!* Now he shows that his claim to have divine power over sins is lived out in his choice of companions. The Pharisees are appalled. He has smashed open their sea-wall, made a way in for the rising tide of sinfulness they have always feared; he has made the ungodly at home in his house. Behind the Pharisees' loud protest is something else: he has surreptitiously untied *their* religious moorings too. If their policy of cloistered aloofness is detonated, where is their religious ground, where are they to stand?

The Church

Here is the point. The Church is heir to the attitude Jesus took towards good and evil. *We say* all the right things, of course: *we* don't suffer from the narrow Pharisaic exclusiveness that Jesus denounced; we're no hypocrites, we say we're sinners at every Mass. But that shocking welcome Jesus extended to the public sinners: *what has become of that?* We have no earthly reason to exclude people from our Church because they are divorced, or homosexual, or addicted, or even (Lord save us) merely coloured or homeless. A Sunday glance around the average suburban Catholic Church will make the point. Is this the refuge of sinners? Or could it be that our attitudes fall dangerously short of Jesus? Have we merely separated ourselves from sinners? Could it be that, beside him, we sound, and behave, *and are*, more like the Pharisees than like him? Fr Philip