

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Ikon of God

Fundamentalists (people who have a very literal way of reading the Bible) may think that the first Commandment, forbidding the making of any image of God, came down from heaven intact, without touching the sides, as it were; as if Moses were a simple messenger, repeating what he heard from God without comment. I don't think so. I think we ought to ask ourselves how this Commandment came to be so vital, and what idea of holiness it represents.

A Mysterious God

I think we must accept that the commandment draws a firm line between the God who has no image and the people who are to worship him. If the farmers of Canaan worshipped Ba'al, a big strong man standing on a golden calf, it surely meant that their god was a good farmer, who got a good return on his efforts; in fact, a successful Canaanite. This led on to the belief that a good life was a profitable farm, plenty to eat, and good health (I suspect this would seem enough for the vast majority of 21st-century people). The Jews were set apart from such beliefs. They worshipped not only an invisible God, but an *unimaginable* God. How austere they must have seemed to the earthy people of Canaan, whose religion was composed of idols, feasts, and fertility rites with much hanky-panky! Yet the purity and holiness demanded by this unseeable Divinity was *very* palpable; his worshippers were obliged to cultivate the most rigorous justice and the most exact obedience, irrespective of their feelings. This God had the power to override human impulses and instincts, symbolised by his right to demand sacrifice from his people.

What Price Human Nature?

The question clearly arises: if God is so far above human nature, what can humanity be worth in his sight? The answer was very impressive: *human beings are created in his likeness, and share in his divine power over the earth.* This stunning piece of theology was composed in Babylon, with the People of God defeated and lapped in the dust of exile. It represents the authentic power of Jewish faith to contradict all the signs, to deny all evidence to the contrary, and to give the lie to the spirits and powers of this world.

Give To God What Belongs To God

The Jews were especially sensitive about the image of Caesar on the Roman coinage. Caesar claimed to be a god, and was accorded divine worship, through his statue, whenever a Roman soldier took the oath of allegiance anywhere on earth. Jews would not carry Roman coins into the Temple: it was bringing an idol into the House of God. So the demand of Jesus to see the coin of the Roman tribute is an important moment. "Whose image is this?" It is the image of Caesar, in whose name the coin was made. Here is the hinge Jesus chooses to turn the question on his adversaries. The word "image" recalls the Creation story, which had so powerfully contradicted the Babylonians during the exile. Give to the Babylonians, to the Romans, what is made in their image: but remember that *you* are made in the image and likeness of God; *you* must belong to Him and give yourselves to Him alone.

Belonging To God Today

In fact, there seems to be very little that belongs to Caesar, if God is the Creator of all that is (including Caesar). To be a Jew was to be specially aware of the sacredness of the people, the holiness of the land God had given them, and the paths of loyalty and integrity he had given them to follow. One way of losing that holiness would be to infect religion with sinful hatred or malice; and that is certainly in today's Gospel. These Pharisees and Herodians are infringing the holiness of God. Can other people sense that sacredness in our lives, two thousand years on? I hope so. You can read it in the martyrs, of course, and in all lives laid down for Christ in any way. But I think people have a right to see it in simple ordinary things, like our faithful determination to worship God every Sunday, like our readiness to pray every day, like our constant refusal to do mean, unjust, untruthful, unkind things. We Catholics can easily come to think little of waiving these commands. If we do, I should like to know how *we* can be said to bear witness to the holiness of God.

Fr Philip