

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

He Must Live Apart

I wonder if you were ever warned, in any specific way, about what used to be called “bad company”. Today it sounds like something shonky on the Stock Exchange. In my youth it meant people who were likely to deprave and corrupt (in whatever mild degree). It’s rather insulting to assume that such mingling always results in the transmission of vice rather than its reverse; it is as if we assume evil is much more powerful than good; and this directly contradicts our faith, which firmly says that love (another word for God) conquers all else, undermines and defeats evil, and is proof against any danger.

Jesus and the Leper

The Biblical condition of the leper - incurable and banished from community life - is happily in the past. But as an image for a certain sort of human predicament it is sharply relevant to us. It isn’t difficult, in our world, to lose one’s place in polite society. It’s a curious fact that the alleged loss, or at least lowering, of standards in our society has seldom made it more inclusive, more welcoming, of those who are “different”. In the Gospel today it is impossible to mistake what is happening. The leper gets his instructions, and sets off to restore his lost relationship with society by showing his health to the priests. But the healing power Jesus has exercised means that the leper’s sentence recoils on Jesus; *he can no longer go into any town, but must stay outside in places where nobody lives*. Mark isn’t a simpleton. He knows he is foreshadowing the Cross at this moment, and that the healthy man who receives the sentence of a leper is the same as the sinless one who will be condemned to die as a criminal. It’s quite extraordinary, that the saintliest people in our society are the most likely, even today, to be shunned and rejected by those who consider themselves to be ordinary sensible people. Jesus suffers this fate *in excelsis*, which is a good reason for us to become aware of the rule. The most dishonoured, the most separated, the most refused of human beings should feel very close to Jesus. He longed to be close to them, and they should not frustrate his longing by any despair of their own. Christian maturity is to be glimpsed in those rare individuals who have the courage to break the isolation, and rescue the lost, with the bravery of Jesus, who allowed himself to be numbered among the sinful.

Warm Yourself At This Story

There was a magnificent story in the news lately, about a little seven-year-old boy who was profoundly deaf. He was about to be shipped out of his village to a “special” school, where he could learn among children who, like him, knew sign-language. The other members of his class were so adamant he should stay in their midst that they *all* learned sign-language. Their teacher was astounded to find thirty children running round the playground, signing spontaneously as they talked without the least awareness. Jesus’ human heart would have leapt to see them. His programme of reuniting the separated, finding the lost sheep, bringing home the prodigal son, and healing the sick was perfectly fulfilled in this remarkable class of children.

Lamb Of God

When John the Baptist said that Jesus would carry the sin of the world, he put his finger on the whole truth. When you see someone in the power of evil, is it your impulse to cross the road, get home and dry, shut the door and think of something else? Jesus had the opposite impulse: to go and be beside the isolated ones, and to put his shoulder under their burden. But if we get into the habit of taking home the drunk and drugged, or sheltering the unwashed homeless, or feeding the real poor at our table, we can say goodbye to our own comfort and security in countless ways. Which is why we don’t want to do it. Now, it’s all very well to pay other people to carry the cross for you - as we do when we pay our taxes so that “they” will look after the aged and sick and homeless; but also when we give to charities of all sorts. But there’s no substitute for the moment when Jesus reaches out and *touches the leper*. That is a gift of self, given and received. We should make sure that we have the experience, not only of seeing others do that, but of doing it ourselves, so that we may ourselves bear witness to the love of God in us.

Fr Philip