

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Do You Want To Go Away Too?

Jesus is watching people leaving his following, unable to accept the teaching he has given them. It is not open to him to modify, or plead, or persuade, or cajole. The issue is too central, and all too clear: he is claiming divine authority for himself, and they have to accept it or reject it. *I have come down from heaven: to learn from God is to accept me. To reject me is to reject God.* It could not be plainer.

“Cradle Catholics”

If you were Catholic from the earliest days, you will have a mind that is accustomed to the articles of the Creed, and the ancient claim of the faith. The Twelve had no such advantage, as they followed Jesus through the villages of Palestine. We read in today’s Gospel of the moment when division finally appeared among Jesus’ hearers. We can’t tell for certain that the way John tells this story accurately represents what really happened on a particular day; it may be a scenario created by the evangelist, which represents the substance of Jesus’ challenge, and the thing which finally offended large numbers of his hearers. I would guess that some scene like this was indeed played out at some point or points, when the true significance of his claim first became clear. We should not assume that the meaning of the moment was lost on anyone: least of all on the disciples themselves. They must have felt the shock in the air as Jesus made these huge, divine claims for obedience. Jewish people had never heard such demands: the Old Testament contains nothing like them; not even Moses, Elijah, Solomon had ever taken such words on their lips. So we shouldn’t think the disciples were rock-solid in their faith, or that they listened to these things with equanimity. Everyone must have been shocked together; and when they saw decent, religious people in the synagogue rise, shaking their heads, stopping their ears, and talking about “intolerable language”, they must have felt the awesome wrench of Jesus’ demands. The sacred realm of God himself, the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was being invaded, it seemed, by a “carpenter from Nazareth”. How could this happen?

The Apostle’s Creed

Here is Peter’s profession of faith in the Fourth Gospel: this is the moment when he rises above the others, and stoutly proclaims his own loyalty.

It is typical that it should be a Galilean fisherman, rather than a distinguished rabbi, or a high-priest from Jerusalem, or a Pharisee, who is free to do this. If the demands of Jesus are awesome, then Peter’s faith is equally so. It’s only when we step back from our Catholic upbringing, and realise the tensions around Jesus at this moment, that we can properly weigh the value of Peter’s words. Rightly, the Church gives us this morning’s first reading, from the book of Joshua, to be a setting for the drama in the Gospel. Joshua assembled the whole people at Shechem, where the Promised Land is, at last, ready to be divided up and distributed among the children of Israel. There he sets before the people a stark choice, whether to serve the God they had worshipped as freed slaves, as nomads in the desert: or to serve the gods of the Canaanites whose lands they had now taken. How can the austere, spiritual God, unseen and unnamed, the God who was present in the vast emptiness of the desert, or swathed in the clouded summit of Sinai, be worshipped amid the earthy realities of the farm and the city, in which they were now to live? It’s a moment of judgment, a crisis. Joshua leads others in a bold declaration of faith, which stands as the headline of a totally transformed history for the whole people. All the more, in welcoming Jesus as the Holy One of God, and the herald of eternal life, Peter speaks the first Creed of a new People of God: the Christian Church. *Fr Philip*