

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Write The Covenant On Your Heart

When we read today of all the Jewish practices of religion (ablutions before meals and “kashering” of dishes and pots) we are remembering a huge cultural inheritance which has served to mark out the Jews down the ages as a special people, a chosen race. Every small detail of life can be turned into an act of obedience to these religious rules - or, of course, an act of dereliction, if the rules are broken. (I think it’s important for our understanding to note that “rules” like these should be distinguished from the Law of God itself; Jesus didn’t neglect God’s Law in failing to observe them.)

The Virtue of Obedience

It seems likely that many of these rabbis’ rules were developed in circumstances where Jewish people were rubbing up against Gentiles, or under threat of having their distinctive life submerged by alien customs or powers. The time of the Exile in Babylon was such a time. It was vital, for the survival of the people, to make their life recognizably different from the life of the oppressors. Doubtless there were many who caved in, ceased to practise their faith, and became part of the Babylonian nation; it seems that many actually argued that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple was a clear sign that the Babylonian gods were greater than the God of Abraham. A Jewish prophet like Ezekiel saw the departure of the Glory of God from the Temple before its fall, and the prophets in general say that God had withdrawn his favour in order for the people to fall victim to foreigners. The Exile was God’s punishment of his people: the conquerors were acting as God’s ministers, with his full consent. The correct attitude of an exile, therefore, was to obey God with scrupulous attention, so as to re-create, in his home and his inner life, a spiritual Promised Land where God’s Law was kept sacred. That is the inspiration behind the rabbinic rules. I can imagine that they would have all the vigour of national customs, which are kept up as a point of honour; not to do so would be seen as a form of local treason.

To The Ends Of The Earth

Isaiah was told that it would not be enough for God’s servant to gather together the scattered children of Israel. His task was *to shepherd the whole world*. This was a key moment, when Israel remembered that its vocation was of worldwide

significance. It wasn’t easy for this theme to be developed or understood. Israel had habitually been a tiny football in the game of great powers: Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, Rome. It was hard enough to preserve a national identity, without understanding how Jerusalem was to become the centre of God’s world. Truly, this theme was never to take practical shape until the great mission of the Christian gospel, which fanned out into the Roman Empire after Pentecost. True to form, the Jewish mind found it impossible to accept this widening of the horizons. By the end of the first Christian century, the Jewish nation was prostrate, dispersed, robbed of every historic sign of its existence. It was in no condition to see its future in a great international movement like Christianity. It was with the greatest difficulty that Paul and his fellow-apostles won the battle against Jewish Christians, who wanted to recruit all Gentiles into Jewish ways. Here we can find the meaning of today’s Gospel, as Jesus calls us to be a people founded, not on nationalistic custom, but on the call to holiness which touches equally the whole of humanity. There is a fearlessness about his assurance: *Nothing that enters you from outside can make you unclean; only what you allow to proceed from within you can do that*. Such a confidence proceeds from that ancient belief that the Covenant of God can be written in the heart. If it is, *they will all know me – the least no less than the great*; we shall be his people, he will be our God.

Fr Philip