

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Not One Of Us

The story of the Church is an amazing history of people sticking together, of community bridging the world and the centuries, of people holding hands across the divides. And the history of the Church bristles with quarrels, fights, wars, splits, excommunication, condemnation, schism. What a paradox! And it isn't simple. Christ does bid us to love one another, to pardon all wrongs, to be one; but also to break our bond with the world, to renounce evil, to condemn sin, to turn away from all that is false. One of the places in the Gospel I least like to meditate on is where Jesus tells us that, if someone offends persistently, he is to be "treated as a tax-collector and heathen" – excommunicated. Don't assume this penalty was invented by the Inquisition: it has always been there in the Gospel: *what you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven.*

Our Awesome Responsibility

We Christians have very solemn duties laid on us, as bearers of the Gospel: to tell the truth firmly and completely, irrespective of the response it evokes; and to make reliable judgments about what is compatible with life in Christ - and what isn't. If we fail to see goodness, unsettle real love, and condemn the blameless, we are guilty of sacrilege. If we call evil good, encouraging others to take an easy path, out of our natural fondness of them, or (worse still) because we want to be liked and accepted, then we run the risk of leading people away from Christ – the ultimate treachery. The sternness of today's Gospel tells us of the danger in which we stand: not to recognize the presence of goodness, and not to denounce evil puts us into a peril that Jesus expresses with the imagery of hell: inextinguishable fire, eternal corruption.

Clear Sight

The Gospel tells us to look attentively for the truth. There are people who are short of the right labels or flags, who yet have the spirit and love of God in them; there are others with ideal credentials, who have been taken over by a different kind of spirit. We sometimes feel that all flags and badges are pernicious; look at Ulster, and see how the banners, labels, and shibboleths of the past blind and pervert people, robbing their Christianity of its divine scope and nature, imprisoning the Gospel in a human politics which persecutes and destroys. Jesus was not joking

when he talked about eternal fire and corruption; you can see both realities, blazing merrily, rotting away the lives of men, women, and children, in our world.

Temples Of The Holy Spirit

Fear, mistrust, small-mindedness all work against the Gospel. Jesus' vision of people in general, and of individual people he met, was sharply different. He famously saw beyond their labels, and the names people called them, and in his acceptance of them people found a path to life. We should notice how, even after seeing Jesus befriending the Gerasene demoniac and the Syrophenician woman, the disciples still want to denounce "a man who is not one of us" for casting out demons in the name of Christ. It's strange to find the seeds of religious strife so near to Jesus; but sadder to find that the rebuke he delivers is as relevant today as it was then. I think the message he is giving us is like what he says to Nicodemus (*Jn3:8*) about the unpredictability of the work of the Spirit. It is not for us to map out the human boundaries of the Spirit's work, because *there are none*. "He blows where he will." What we can do is to alert our eyes and ears, and constantly to *expect* the ordinary world to glow with his divine presence. There can be little doubt that, if we went into every meeting we are offered with precisely that sort of mind, we would make it easier for others to believe, for God's grace to strike roots in the world. *.Fr Philip*