

We have been reading about the way the Church dealt with its first and perhaps its greatest question: whether or not a Christian is automatically also a Jew. The argument is that Christians must be Jews because God's salvation comes through the Jews is powerful. Those who felt that, little by little, Jesus the Messiah was dominating and overshadowing all that had gone before - Patriarchs, Prophets, even Moses the Lawgiver - would have felt no differently: the argument that Christians must be Jews because Jesus is a Jew is even more persuasive.

The opposing argument was from the Gentile mission: the experience that purely pagan people could display every sign of spiritual grace and personal conversion - without the ministrations of the *briss* or the pilgrimage to the Temple or the refusal of pig's flesh - overwhelmed the apostles who were sent to them; these same apostles probably saw immediately that any attempt to impose on them the massive preconceptions and inheritance of Jewish religion would be doomed from the outset. Suddenly, with the Spirit's wind blowing freely in these new Churches, the Jewish world looked narrow and frustrating: its prescriptions a series of national obsessions with the past, which disabled Israel in the wider world of the Roman Empire. Suddenly Jewishness looked superannuated - and the solemnity of the Jewish refusal of Jesus began to seem more and more decisive. Things had radically changed, and the first Council of the Church decided to put it into plain words.

One of the things which astonishes us about the deliberations of these first Christians is their assurance that God is with them. *It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves....* This first example of the solemn claim of the power of God in the deliberations of the Church is breathtaking. The second thing must be the live sense of democracy that accompanies the proceedings: *The whole Church concurred with this.* These two realities are essential to our self-consciousness as a Church: the faith that God is with us, and the sureness that we ourselves are united amongst ourselves. Wherever the authorities within the Church do deeds that pay no homage to God, they damage the Church; wherever the whole Church does not assent to what is done, it is clear that there has been a mistake.

In the Gospel today Jesus reminds us to value ourselves, not by any earthly measure, but by the fact that he, the Son of God, has laid down his life for us. Henceforth we must think of ourselves and of each other in that light. Our default mode is no longer grudging tolerance, or vigilant indifference, or a prudent distance between ourselves and others, but the same total love which Jesus showed for us. If we make that step forward, we shall begin to know the way the Father conducts his mysterious business, and come to produce the strange fruit of the Kingdom of Heaven