

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## A New Beginning

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and the first day of a new year of salvation. We are beginning a new Christian millennium, and a new episcopate in our Diocese: in this week our new Bishop will be ordained in the Cathedral, bringing to an end the twentieth-century history of our Diocese and inaugurating a new era.

### What does Scripture say?

The first words of Scripture today talk about the growing of a new branch on David's tree; and this is pretty dramatic, since to earthly eyes the line of David had already been extinguished by the invading generals of Babylon. What we have here is therefore a tremendous act of faith in God's power to reverse the forces of history. And he does not do this by a trivial, like-for-like substitution, putting back what had been taken away. God's characteristic mode is to go beyond what makes up the past, to do a new thing, to transcend the limitations of what has failed before. *You didn't understand*, he says: *I will show you what I mean*. This is why we end up with a *New Testament*; the old covenant is made good by a new initiative, and this time it will be eternal.

### Where will this happen?

The disciples ask for directions when Jesus begins to talk like this. He does not sound very consoling in his reply. The new world will not be born, clearly, until the old one has passed away. Its dying will be tremendous, devastating, and will take some people with it: I've always been haunted by the phrase *men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world*. When we see things in these dire straits, we are told, we must *stand up and hold our heads high, because liberation is near at hand*. I guess we should bring all this down to earth as soon as possible. The long-stop of Advent, after all, is Christmas, the feast of everything *coming true*: in the incarnation God becomes a human fact. With this realism lying ahead of us, we must make the Advent message real too, relate it to the facts of our real life.

### Coarsened Hearts?

The warning of Jesus to us in today's Gospel is that we should beware of our hearts becoming *overwhelmed* (the version we use says *coarsened*). The Greek word means *overburdened, choked up, heavy*. I know what that means, and I know how

effectively it prevents me from standing up and lifting my head, how utterly it blocks out the prospect of redemption. The wintry heart has become beaten down, exhausted, tired of bad news, tired of overwork, tired of the struggle. Does that sound pessimistic? There is little mileage, according to today's Gospel, in facile optimism; things are, it seems, going to get worse, and then worst. Notice: we aren't told to lift our heads *after* this all takes place, but *as it begins to happen*. This is the spirit of Advent, the spirit of the new year, the new millennium (and possibly the new Bishop). We aren't going to fool ourselves into false happiness. We're going to find our hope in the very passing-away of the old world – even though we're implicated in it, invested in it, in it up to our necks. *It's all got to go*, and in the process we will lose all the muck and brass that has burdened us and weighed us down and made it impossible to free ourselves and look upwards. I appreciate the mention of *drunkenness*. Our clinging to the dying world is like the alcoholic's addiction to the very thing that is killing him, his fatal conviction that his only happiness is lurking in a bottle. He knows it is nonsense, but he can't extricate his life from its grip. That is how we are towards the world, whose boiling sea and afflicted sky are loudly warning us of disaster. The future isn't in it; its gifts are unsafe; we must realize our assets and beat it while the going is good. Perhaps we could try to make the Christmas we celebrate this year different. I hope so!

Fr  
Philip