

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Every Valley Shall Be Exalted

How much nobler is the word “exalted” than our Lectionary’s “filled in”! I recall that throughout the Middle Ages there used to be a division of territory between the two great orders of monks: the Benedictines used to build their monasteries on the heights, and always tended towards the dominant and the splendid: while the Cistercians sought out the secluded valleys, and tended towards the humble and simple. So Clairvaux (Valley of Light) and Rievaulx (*Ryedale*) are Cistercian, and *Mont St Michel* is Benedictine. In this country, in modern times, we break ranks and have built Buckfast and Downside (Benedictine) in valleys, and Mount St Bernard (Cistercian) on a hill. Humph.

Spiritual Valleys

In the Scriptures, it’s rather simpler. Valleys are places of darkness and fear, just because they are impenetrable; by contrast, the open heights belong to the God who dwells in the heavens above the heavens. That, surely, gives us the correct understanding of today’s great road-building prophecy of Isaiah: that what has been impenetrable will now become a passage to life. As usual, we will “hear” the message properly the moment we have located the impenetrable place *in ourselves* – those deep and darkened paths in our life which we dare not enter, or choose to ignore. Where are your “no-go areas”? There might be some sacrifice you shrink from, some forgiveness you have never given or sought, some person you’ve never accepted, some truth you’ve never faced. In every life there are unexplored regions where wolves roam, and no-one goes. You could think of your life as a city, containing settled areas, with good street-lights and proper drains, but also the red-light streets, the power-centres, and then the desert tracts, where communications are rare and unreliable, and no-one knows for certain what the conditions are. Do you have bits of your personality that are like that? If so, don’t think they’ve been neutralised, or that they do not exert their authority over you. Secretly, such places are calling you, with their mysterious powers: fear, anxiety, the sense of being not quite in charge, or the sense of being haunted, or the sense that you are in danger. We can become very frustrated, without quite knowing why, until we’ve risked the dark paths, tested out our land. Isaiah knows this. *Winding ways will be straightened, rough roads made smooth, and all mankind shall*

see the salvation of God. That’s a remarkably deep and impressive promise, which we can translate very personally: *all of my life* will know the presence of God, every part of me will acknowledge him as Creator, and therefore as Redeemer – because he makes nothing in vain, nothing by accident, nothing that he will later want to destroy. Redemption, whatever else it means, will mean we see ourselves, all within us, and all around us, as God sees us. I am looking forward to that *very* much. The people I’ve loved, I believe, are the ones I’ve seen in that way. What if, one day, I should see everyone like that?

What A Gang

Luke, in the headlines of the Gospel proper which we read today, names the luminaries who preside over the time of Jesus’ appearing. We can hardly miss the fact that most of them – Pontius Pilate, the brothers Herod and Philip, and Annas and Caiaphas the priests – will play a part in the deaths of John and of Jesus. What a puzzle of interlocking interests, and motives, and compromises they present! Indeed, an impenetrable tangle, out of which come the feral deeds of the Crucifixion. But notice how that drama of the Passion, which begins after nightfall, and passes judgment and sentence in the dark, at last comes out of the alleyways of the Jerusalem mob, and the fields of power of Sanhedrin and Praetorium, and ascends the hill of Calvary, where, naked, exposed, and above all *lifted up*, the Son of God draws Caiaphas, Pilate, you, me, and all humanity to himself. That is the exaltation of the humble King, the making plain of the rough places. It’s a huge paradox that the lifting up of Jesus should be the true fulfilment of the prophecy of Israel’s glory: *Arise, Jerusalem, stand on the heights, and turn your eyes to the east* is a command that Christians have been obeying ever since. All the inhabitants of the crooked paths and passages of the city are gathered around him, as the servant of God is raised to the highest place of the earth, and mankind sees the salvation of God.
Fr Philip