

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## No More Evil To Fear

A lot of the bad things that happen in the world happen because of people's fear. It is frequently out of deep fearfulness that we feel obliged to turn to violence, rudeness, and selfishness. *Look after Number One*, we think, *nobody else will. Hit them hard before they hit you. Always think the worst, and you won't be disappointed...*etcetera. This can be an habitual cast of mind, the default response we make as we bear down upon a ringing 'phone or open a knocked-on door: *always assume you're about to be robbed – you probably are.*

### Generosity and Joy

The characteristic Christian response ought to be the reverse of this misery. The knowledge that *we are loved* is all-important to us, and this is something no Christian can ever thoughtfully lack. *The Lord is in your midst* automatically leads on to *Rejoice, exult, shout aloud for joy*. You only need to understand the first for the second to follow. See how Zephaniah has expressed it: *Punishment? Repealed. Enemies? Driven away. Evil? Nothing to fear!* But the heart of the message is even better: the joy of God *over us* is ebullient, irrepressible: we are offered the image of a bridegroom God exulting over us, constantly returning to caress us, and leaving us only "to dance with shouts of joy over you". That's what "in your midst" means when it speaks of God-with-us. It may take a lot to appropriate this fact, to let it change us: but such is the spiritual work of Advent. Indeed, we can only be miserable when we forget these things, when we revert to life in an unloved and unredeemed mode, that immense fold of sadness in which the world that does not believe finds itself darkly pastured. *Like sheep they are driven to the grave, where death shall be their shepherd*, says Ps 49; and we should ask ourselves whose hand we obey – the grim shepherd who leads us to the loss of all things, or the eternal shepherd who leads us faithfully into life. In some sense we ought to refuse to swallow the false gospel that makes us into the unloved, as *sheep that do not listen to strangers*, in favour of the faithful Gospel that calls us to life and trust. And here we find ourselves hearing the sharp edge of the tongue of John the Baptist. His call to holiness rings with *practical* consequences: be merciful, be generous: be just, be content with what is right. It is true that he depicts the coming of Christ in fearful terms: the Holy Spirit comes

with fire, and the world will be harvested and threshed, before the final conflagration in which the enemies of life will perish. But the gathering into the barns of all that is good will be secure; and the visitation of doom on all evil is cause for joy in the tents of the just.

### Rejoice, rejoice!

He says it twice: in the first place because he wants us to take him seriously, and in the second place because he knows how readily we find reasons *not* to rejoice, and thirdly because this is a huge joy, for which once is not enough. We could take him up this week, and repeat the command to ourselves regularly. You may find yourself taking antibiotics this winter, and the Word of God is more vital even than them. *Space the doses regularly, make sure you complete the course!* I could guarantee you that if you take the command to rejoice, framed in its proper background in the Lord's closeness, four times daily, preferably at least once after Eucharistic food, and let it sink in for a few minutes, you will find your wrinkles perceptibly lessening, your anxieties receding, your joints loosening up, and a general sense of tolerance and peacefulness seeping through your nervous system. This is not a matter of auto-suggestion or brain-washing. It is simply entering into the Good News *as a fact* instead of nodding towards it as a theory. You can see that good news so appropriated has a real chance of entering the bloodstream, and taking flesh. What do we understand by *taking flesh*? The flesh is what Jesus came to take: and he takes it, first of all, to himself; then he takes it to the Father's house. In order to be saved, we must trust this map of our experience, let it become the truth about us. Things that possess us usually take root in the mind; then the heart responds, and at last the slow old body gets itself into gear, and we lurch into life that can be shared with others. Our faith is absolutely radical: the idea that grounds it is: The Word Takes Flesh And Lives Amongst Us. Amen: Come, Lord Jesus. *Fr Philip*