

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Temporal and Eternal Death

*It gets you in the end*, we say gloomily. But we're wrong. Death is a stage on the way, but the end is something else. If you think death is the end, how will you respond when you awaken *to judgment*?

### **Pie In The Sky? I Think Not**

If the Christian Gospel promised *post-mortem* Cruises to the Kingdom, it would deserve the reputation it sometimes has for wishful thinking. There are four realities we call *Last Things*: we each encounter but three of them. They are death, judgment, and heaven or hell. You will notice that three-quarters of the future is highly disturbing, and far from enticing. I heartily wish we were able to face them better. Perhaps today's Scripture can guide us.

### **Repent Or Perish**

We may sometimes forget that sin has the power to kill us off, not just in temporal terms (though it sometimes does that) but in our eternal prospects. Sin, in eternal terms, is terribly like cancer in temporal terms: cancer grows with our growth, it creates its own bloodstream and accesses our life-force, it saps us and possesses us, and at last it takes our life. This sinister reality is, to me, the closest parable of the experience of sin. A surgeon can stand helpless before cancer, because disease and healthiness have become indistinguishable: the removal of the disease would kill the patient. In the same way sin does not tempt us to evil, but to good; we choose what looks like a richer life, and find we have spoiled and lost and wasted what we have. The terrible thing is the loss of the power to distinguish good from evil, they are so compactly grown. In this context, how are we to attempt repentance, which depends on the recognition (diagnosis) of sin, and the will to separate ourselves from it (surgery)? Even where it seems that to cut it out means a kind of death, the parable holds good: because our faith is not about incurability, but about the ultimate power of God over sin, the enduring will of God to give life to those he has made. This is precisely the journey to Easter, where Jesus does not elude death, but goes down before it as we do. I don't see that we are being escapist in this, since death is as awesome – and sometimes, as awful – an experience for us as for anyone else. But the struggle to be on the side of life, in the living we do for whatever span we are given, is training us for the task of dying in faith. Our pain at parting,

and loss, and physical suffering, are as sharp as ever: but we have a reason for bearing them with hope and courage, *which our nature demands*. We should not think that it is not there for us.

### **Proclaiming The Faith**

This means that our coming to the limits of earthly life, whether in the business of dying, or in the season of Lent in which we are living now, is a travelling in faith. This is no shouting in the dark, but the holding up of a mirror to the light of the world. Jesus speaks to us today about the Indian earthquake, the Gulf War, the conflicts and disasters which scar and torment the history of the world. Not punishment, he says; but images of a kind of dying that is senseless, wasteful, needless. Unless you change your heart, that will be the quality of *your* death: that will be *your* epitaph. It's a solemn thought, and it is followed by something even more urgent: the little picture of the farmer who is tired of his fruitless tree, and ready to tear it out and burn it. To our surprise, the representative of God the Father in this parable is not the owner of the vineyard (the accustomed shorthand for *Israel*) but the gardener, who says: *Leave it one more year, let me disturb its roots and manure it. It may bear fruit next year.* That is the map for our Lenten prayer: that we are living in borrowed time, and that we have urgent work to accomplish, to bear fruit for eternal life.  
*Fr Philip*