

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Trusting in Flesh

Our nature as flesh and blood people always leaves us vulnerable to bodily realities. When the Bible tells us bodily realities are not to be relied on, we tend not to listen. We think stubbornly that reality means physical, body-facts *first*, with the other sort of truths much less easy to deal with. We're pretty suspicious of non-physical facts, and suspect that anything demanding an act of faith is an opportunity for deception.

God Is Spirit

Now, when we're called on to say what we believe in, we don't start with physical facts at all. We say instead, *We believe in one God*; and that is the first and most vital act of faith for us. Perhaps we should notice how right that is. We know no physical body better than we know our own; yet how reliable is it? I guess some are more reliable than others; but I wouldn't like the rest of humanity to have to rely on my eyesight, hearing, touch, power of smell or taste. I know how often these senses are deceived; and how can I rely on my understanding if that's the case? There is, as St Thomas said, *nothing in the understanding that hasn't come in via the senses*; so my memory is no better than my senses. Because of the body, the future is in grave doubt. I can't even say *with certainty* that I'll be able to do something next Thursday, so tenuous is my hold on life. The fact that I'm here now, healthy and in my right mind, says nothing (my family is very good at sudden surprise changes of plan in this regard). Then, of course, the succession of physical facts makes little sense by itself: it requires someone to *make sense of them*: in other words, purely physical things are of little interest until there is a *mind* to approve and welcome, or disapprove and reject them.

Human Values

It is human beings who give things value; and they do this by their spiritual faculties – their appreciation, their taste, their power to decide and to choose. These powers may be all mixed up with physical realities, but of themselves they are truly spiritual. The physical facts about two women may be quite similar; but one is the bus conductress, and the other is lovely and fair as the rose of the summer; one may be just Rosie O'Grady, while the other is the Rose of Tralee. The difference lies, not in any physical facts, but in the mind and heart of the lover. Ask any

husband to prove, *from physical facts alone*, that he loves his wife, or *vice-versa*. It can't be done. Yet the love is the vital difference, the most important fact about either of them. And it is a *spiritual* fact, not a physical one.

Promises, promises

That's what we say when we feel unsure about another's good faith. Yet promises are among the most powerful spiritual facts we know. If we lose the power to hope in a promise – because we don't trust the promiser – then we lose the power to have a truly human relationship. If we lose the power to promise – because we don't trust ourselves – then we have lost our own soul. In the Gospel today, Luke tells us of the Beatitudes, in which Jesus pledges the love of God to the poor, the hungry, the sad – all whose suffering is a real physical fact – and promises them joy in the future. They are accompanied by the woes – addressed to the rich, the replete, and the rejoicing – promising them grief and loss to come. It seems that we are to declare our independence of the physical facts, renouncing them as the chief indicator of our value and state. This is a real test for us. But it is a vital one for us to take, and to pass, if the Creed we say today is to punch its weight in the real world. If God, who is Spirit, is the prime fact of our life, we must learn to look beyond the physical truths to the spiritual ones; and in the end, all spiritual truth is One, in whom we live, and move, and have our being.
Fr Philip