

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## A Vain Thing

If there is God, then God is the answer to the meaning of life. If you decide to leave God out, from some doctrinaire prejudice or wrong-headedness, you will have purposely thrown away the key. Irreligion makes it hard to understand properly. On the other hand, God is never defeated, even by irreligion. He just has to be creative. This is not difficult for God. He is like that.

### The First Commandment

In older translations of Scripture God is sometimes called *a jealous God*, by which modern human beings (mis)understand that he's dangerously possessive, compulsive, and distorting heavily; jealousy, we know, is the least attractive of all the unhealthy enemies of love. What the word means when applied to God is that God wants to be the *one* we worship: to put it another way, he wants our worshipping hearts to be undivided. If there is *one* God, we who worship him can be whole of heart. Further, if all of us worship *one* God, then all of us can be one in mind and heart: in our deepest belonging, our most fundamental love, we can be together. Thus the love of one God can unite the human personality, and the human family. (Also, there *is* only one God, so worshipping a few, or a whole selection, would be making a biggish mistake.)

### But They Would Not

The trouble is, that so many of us get imbrangled in other schemes for making our hearts whole, some of which are short cuts to selfishness, and therefore loneliness. The gratification of desire for wealth, or sensual pleasure, or beauty, or power, or Miss Joan Hunter-Dunn, or the Pease Pottage Garden Association Trophy for Jerusalem Artichokes, or the Olympic Gold for Press-Ups, or the Holy Grail itself can all become the shimmering goal for a lifetime of longing and struggle. We all enrol in one of these different races at one time or another: some of us secretly, some of us on the front (or the back, or page three) of the newspapers. And where is God meanwhile, and do we know what is he thinking? Hosea thought he was suffering dreadfully, and wringing his hands over our infidelity. But I suspect he is not quite so unhappy. I guess he is enjoying the story much of the time, since he can read the mind of the deepest of us very easily. He can see how the longing for a newly-engineered

nose or a clandestine love-affair is really a misunderstood longing for him. He also knows in advance how much effort it will take, and how far the result will fall short of bringing happiness. Sometimes our plans are so bad that they inflict huge agony on ourselves or others, and for this God will be full of compassion. Patiently he waits until we have run through our plans for fulfilment, keeping safe and sound his own plan for our final entrance into life. I don't think his "jealousy" keeps him away from us. Even the Pease Pottage Judging Tent can be a Tent of Meeting.

### Build Some Bigger Barns

But what are we to say of the moment in the Gospel, where the truth breaks the dream, and we find ourselves awakened from our illusions? It is desperately painful when our plans come to nothing. God, of course, remains, the true aim, the real purpose, and he still shines at the end of the pilgrimage. But if our irreligion has excluded him, if our vision went no further than the long-desired prize, the devouring passion for human glory, or the charms of Miss Hunter-Dunn, shortly to be Mrs A. N. Other, then we are crushed by the ruins of our toppling pagan temple, and we can't see the overwhelming fact, the real truth: that *God is still there*, as he was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. He is then the all-important, the *only* One.

### Last Judgment

This is what the Church means when it speaks of our personal or "particular" judgment when we die. It is sometimes depicted as entirely a condemnatory encounter, when punishment is meted out to those who have chosen to avoid God. I have a much more sanguine outlook. When God's gaze rests on us, we shall, after all, see ourselves as God sees us; and speaking personally, I don't think I know what that looks like. I think it will be rather revealing about both of us. I think that nothing else will matter, because I shall see in God all I have ever loved, and know what it means to be one with him.  
*Fr Philip*