

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Look, Foreigners!

It's often said that nationalism is a very dubious quality. I think that a nation's culture is real treasure; but it is currency that can, should, be shared about. No-one could mistake St Paul's Cathedral for an Italian building, but it would never have been possible without Italian architects and their Roman forebears. Acanthus-leaves grow on both Greek hillsides and the columns of British High-street banks.

### Recent Racist History

The history of Europe is full of racism, as the different nationalities made monsters of each other (and occasionally of themselves) to the point where any lie about the French or the Germans would be believed in the leafy lanes of England. Our Empires made underclasses out of coloured people or distant foreigners, and institutionally exploited them. If we sometimes made things better, we didn't seem to revise our general view that the Rest of the World was fundamentally inferior to Us. All this has gone on for too long. It was the fashion in 1500; indeed, we owe the Reformation partly to the rise of nationalism. But we should have grown out of this by now, having noticed how the unity of Europe has lengthened the time since the last World War. Our lesson could have been reinforced by Rwanda and Burundi, who experienced merciless slaughter along tribal borders such a short time ago. One priest said sadly, "We discovered blood was thicker than water, even the water of Baptism."

### God's Impatience

God shows himself at his most creative when he meets up with smug nationalism. His aim in choosing the Jews was not to consecrate our human tendency to snobbism, but to create a "growing edge" which would teach the world to know its Maker. So the choice of Israel is represented as a gift of love, but also as a challenge, a vocation to bear witness before the other nations: a witness of holiness, of maturity, of sheer goodness of life, with awareness of divine blessings and humble gratitude. Instead, he reaped a harvest of tyranny, oppression, resentment, greed, and forgetfulness. But even in this, Israel was instructing the rest of the world. We must learn the values they refused to learn, and heed the voice of the prophets.

### Jesus the Prophet

Jesus sensed, even in the reduced and occupied nation in which he lived, a pride and hatred of others which seemed almost incorrigible; and he addressed these attitudes with the stern rebuke of a true prophet. His attitude could never have been forgotten by his followers, because they ran headlong into it, like a bus into a wall, when they tried to welcome Gentile converts into the Church. Today's Gospel is a piece of the Lord's teaching about Jewish complacency, and the unnerving future he saw for it. What – the Jews turned away at the gate of heaven, only to see the despised figures of Gentiles sitting down to feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob *and the prophets?* Jews have frequently felt at odds with prophets; but to be excluded from Abraham, the father of all who believe, would have shocked them beyond belief. This is the feeling we should cultivate in reading today's Gospel. Do *we* need to be shocked into re-thinking our ideas about race and nationality? Of course *we* are not racist at all. It's just that we all know you can't trust foreigners, and if they move into your street there'll be trouble, and the rest. The attitudes survive, even though we abhor their label. I think the point about which we should be anxious is that innocent-seeming prejudices actually bring about the worst consequences; we suspect we could not communicate with strangers, and when we meet them, we make a generous encounter impossible. In this, we need to be made like Christ. *Fr Philip*