

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

That Story Again

We have, most of us, known the child who wants a story at bedtime, and who is too young to read. Invariably, I find, the story at the end of the day is an old one, and is repeated endlessly, the child being in a kind of trance as it unfolds. Try to skip a page, or change one of the words, and you are firmly corrected at once. That tenacity gives confidence in the exact memory of the illiterate: the sort of memory the Bible lived in, long before it was committed to writing.

Anything New, Father?

This Sunday's story is certainly a great one. I feel no urge to alter it, as its conception and technique seem to me perfect. It has that great charm which all the best stories have, of giving us an insight into several different minds, so that we feel the tensions between them. The interest is in the different attitudes two people can have towards one thing. If you choose an alternative title for this story, you will find that three attitudes immediately occur. For instance, if you called it *Going Home*, you would find one attitude in the spendthrift (summed up in the phrase *Gizza Job*): another in his brother (*Blasted Cheek!*) and a third – which must be allowed the final word – in the Father: *My son was dead, and has come back to life; he was lost, and now he is found*. That sentiment must overcome the attitudes of both of the two sons. In the process it must take possession of us.

What Will It Take?

The Father's attitude has to change theirs; it has to change ours too. The story is beguiling, and we feel it should be a simple business to see the point. But translate the story into our own situation, and things are not so simple. The change required of the spent-up wild rover means abandoning his mercenary and self-centred programme, to make room for the relationship with the family which he had discounted as a matter of course. He had, of course, spent his cash inheritance; if that were all his family meant, his attitude would have been exactly right. But families *do* mean more than cash inheritances. Therefore he has to accept a change which removes him from the driving-seat, and lets his Father take charge. His homecoming is demanding, unlike the business deal he wanted it to be. His elder brother, self-righteous and mean, is just as imprisoned in financial facts: deeply jealous of the spending and the fun,

knowing his own life has been boring and repetitive, he is filled with resentment and sourness, which he feels ought to be shared by everyone else. He wants to punish his brother, but he wants to punish his Father too, because his own life has been, as he freely admits, lived like a slave.

Unforgiveness Is Enslavement

When we carry resentment, we accept a servitude that is as demeaning and killing as that of the concentration camps. It turns our sacrifice into oppression, our generosity into sullen self-deprivation. Worst of all, it keeps us under the thumb of the Evil One, who has given us a wound we will carry to the grave. Evil has won, as long as we refuse forgiveness or harbour grudges. The Father beckons the younger son to a life of honour and worthiness, based on the true coin of a parent's love. He invites his elder son and heir to re-enter the house he can call his own, and to be worthy to possess it, to be *the steward who gives the family their proper food at the right time*. What he invites both of them to do, is actually to inherit – both of them for the first time – the life-giving love of their Father. That is their true treasure. Without it, the family would have no true wealth; and they would neither of them be true heirs. In one's folly, and in the other's meanness, they possess nothing except the seeds of their own destruction. He must get them to drop those things, and inherit life from their Father, to be true sons. We too must become true heirs.

Fr Philip