

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Unprofitable Servants

Do you think we sometimes make a favour out of our religion? There's a sort of pay-off for any "good deed", and we can make ourselves feel better about ourselves by going out of our way for someone else. Perhaps we can come to employ our religion in the same weird way, forgetting what it is all for.

Alpha And Omega

As we mark up the Paschal Candle on the night of the Resurrection, we salute Jesus Christ as *Alpha and Omega* (A to Z in the language of the New Testament). This is the Christian form of the Jewish creed, which says: *Listen, Israel: the Lord your God is One, the Only Lord*. Within our relation to Christ, everything about us must be included and put into order, from Alpha to Omega. Designed by God the Father in him, conceived in him and born in him, we live in him and we will go to him in our dying. So in our life there's nothing irrelevant, incidental or marginal. Sometimes I think we have come to use our religion like customers, as people might one morning feel like a jog, or a session under the sun-lamp, a trip to the hairdresser, or a visit to Church.

The Market-place

Our world is busy turning every relationship we could possibly have into a piece of commercial dealing. This influence, which I believe is pernicious, seeps into every corner of our lives. Do people drink water? Of course. Right - how can we *sell* it to them? Do people need transport? Sure! Well, let's maximise its potential and get rich! We'd be horrified to see it written up as an article of faith that EVERYTHING CAN BE BOUGHT. Yet there are whole areas which used to be considered sacred and humane, which are slowly turning into simple commerce. There is a commercial language in education, which intensifies the higher you go; students are treated as customers, their education as a product: it is all priced up. Medical care is openly treated as a product to be marketed. The day when you can buy a baby, and choose the colour of his or her hair is inexorably approaching (*Ask to see our range of nursery curtains at the design briefing*). We now have a thing called "the sex industry", with a full gamut of "services" on offer, catalogue on request. On the tails of Nottingham buses, I've seen the words "Divorce. £300 plus Court Fees" and the name of a sharp solicitor. Nothing sacred?

Nothing at all. As long as you can afford it, it's all possible. Even time's money.

Capability

The eighteenth-century art of landscape gardening allowed a few powerful magnates to demolish and rebuild nature, creating country palaces surrounded by custom-built views. Lancelot "Capability" Brown was the smartest artist in this field. We have taken the hint, and set about tailoring the world to our own taste. I feel that many people have left "conventions" behind and set out to create a special world of their own. Every so often a publicist tells me I should get up and smell the coffee, and market the Church as a player in the field. We could easily include the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel as one more commodity, as we catalogue *meditation* with *aromatherapy*, *penance* with *hypnosis*, *prayer* with *yoga*, and the rest. But leave me out. The soul of religion seems to me to be the leaving-behind of self in a humble search for the Maker of all, who is the End of all. Obedience, not the satisfaction of our needs, is the search-engine. We don't come to God primarily because we need him. We come to him because he calls us. Our very being is his initiative, not ours, and understanding ourselves entails the understanding of him.

No More Than Our Duty

However devotedly we enter into our religion, we'll never advance from being *beneficiaries*. We don't earn God's love or his saving of us; it isn't a covenant between equals, we aren't God's customers *and never will be*. God deserves to be the beginning and the end of our thinking and questioning, our building of hopes and our daily decisions, not a component of our designer lives. If we get this vital fact right, it will be because we have given God his true place in our deliberations. If we fail to accord him this right, then all our calculations will be arid, mean, and fruitless – our humanity lost in a dead end. It is risen humanity – the Easter Christ – who is our beginning, and the Omega of all who live and breathe. *Fr Philip*