

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Propping Up The Prophet

Today's story of Moses at the Battle of Rephidim is impressive. As long as his arms are raised, the battle goes Israel's way. With the help of his supporters, "Moses' arms remained firm till sunset."

A Mighty Figure

In a place where *God* might have been expected to support his herald, Moses needs other people. His work on the day of battle is not to join in the bloodbath, but to climb to the hilltop and to *pray*. His prayer is of vital importance to the army: they need to see him at prayer, they need the posture of prayer raised above them. Moses is not spared the physical demands of "keeping his arms raised"; the moment he relaxes, the battle goes to the enemy.

Church In The World

We cannot doubt for a moment that the presence in the world of the praying Church has an exactly similar effect. I can think of two examples, one quite disturbing, to illustrate what I mean. If you have ever felt a sense of deep distress, and wandered into a church – not filled with any hope of finding solace, but because you've nowhere else to go – you may suddenly find yourself confronted by the living presence of faith, in the form of other people praying. I remember the relief of slipping into the shadows at the back of church, to listen to ordinary voices saying the Rosary. The rhythmic antiphonal beat has the same effect as watching waves, the raised voices embody confidence and peace. Where you have come to the end of your solutions or ideas, the simple discourse of prayer speaks on. The *words* are all there: the Lord's Prayer moulding our minds to Christ's mind, the Angelic Salutation speaking of the incarnation, the doxology giving glory to the Trinity: but they do not need to break surface. What feeds us, in that moment, is the simple fact of the praying Church, these various voices raised together in supplication. It is a gift of communion, lending aid subconsciously.

In Tenebris

The other example comes from hospital. I came late in life to the experience of hospital patienthood. That's not unique; but I'd been thinking about it for years as a hospital chaplain. I always had a sense of inadequacy, since my sympathy for patients was all based on my

imagination; I *thought* I could tell what it was like, but I wasn't sure. I was particularly anxious about looking after dying people, and from the beginning I was terrified of saying anything trivial or presumptuous to people walking in that space where I'd never been. So when I found myself in a hospital bed, part of me was thinking: *what will this be like spiritually?*

Care Of The Dying

One of the surprising things I knew from the past was that the work of a *hospice* chaplain isn't as demanding as I'd expected. I remember a time in hospitals when I felt I was the only person prepared to talk about death with a patient. Now the accuracy and honesty of nurses' care make it less essential to have a priest on hand. Nurses have become aware that sometimes a good nurse can help people to face death with open eyes. In my case, I found the loud, clanging world of the hospital ward inimical to reflection, let alone prayer. I was too *busy* for peace or silence. The struggle for calm didn't seem realistic. At the same time, I knew that the salvation I was experiencing lay in the hands of those who were caring for me, and I found it deeply moving. At the same time, I didn't seem to need religious words or signs; it was as if what I'd learned in contemplating the Cross had come too close – for me, and for my fellow-patients - to need any other expression. The cross itself had arrived. At the same time, I was hugely aware of the prayers of others, and deeply consoled by their thought for me, and their own "keeping their arms raised" when mine seemed, for the moment, to be lowered in weakness. I learned something very deep in those days. God was truly putting his finger on my lips, and I was truly entrusting myself into the hands of others. That's a great experience of being the Church. We are the praying people of the world. We must pray *without ceasing* for all who cannot pray for themselves: even when, surprisingly, they turn out to be priests. Priests too need praying for. I am grateful to all who did that for me at the most anxious time.

Fr Philip