

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Big Question

Asking questions is the most human thing to do. Animals try to understand, but only on the simplest practical level (*What Now?*). We ask practical questions, of course: how do I work, how do I get what I need, how do I stop this pain, and so on. But we ask deeper questions when we come to be at rest (where animals usually fall asleep). *Why am I here? What should I be like? What is best as a reason for living? What matters most?* These are questions demanding great judgment, a measure of oversight, a broad view. But they aren't just academic. The answers we give to the big questions govern the answers we give to all the lesser ones.

### When I Was A Child...

...I used to talk, think, argue like a child. A child has to accept high values from others: when you are young, the big questions are too great for you. Growing up, we put these borrowed values to the test, to see if they are good for the life we are living too. This process is essential for us, and it is vital that our parents and other authorities give us room to do it freely. From then onwards, we have to be in dialogue with the values in which we have chosen to invest our lives. We have to cope with our failure to embody them, sometimes even to understand them. We learn to *keep* them as we keep our friends; sometimes friends are uncomfortable with each other, and they have to choose between growing in friendship, and saying goodbye. It's the same with our values. Our closeness to them is only good if they evolve, deepen, challenge us anew, demand ever greater things of us.

### In The Desert

Jesus in the wilderness has put aside little questions; in the desert it isn't about *what shall we have for tea?* Fasting, waking, just *existing* in a vacant aloneness lets him look at his own value, stark, sharply-defined, in a brilliant, merciless light that reveals all. *Then* comes the Tempter, hitting him where all humans are vulnerable (yes, Jesus too was). Food from the stones of the earth; a religion built round himself instead of faith in God; the simple, straight offer of untold riches, the power and glory of the nations. Out in the desert they appear as comforting choices. Professor Dawkins, who thinks religions are the real bogeymen of human history, could probably

make a deal with these three. The loss of God in the process, he thinks, would be no loss for him.

### Opting For The Most High

*Dwelling in the shelter of the Most High* is the phrase of Ps 91 for the choosing of the only safe place there is. In the desert Jesus meets Death; fasting in that unliveable place brings him (and me, and you) face to face with it. The option of *lesser* things, to answer the question Death poses, is called sin. Confronted with Death, the only proper answer is to choose the Lord and Giver of Life. There is another option, of course: and that is never to go into the desert, never to meet Death. Live as if there were no tomorrow: live with your eyes scarfed up against the sight of Death, as he picks off the others one by one. Don't let yourself be asked that big question, and you won't have to find any answer.

### Not An Option

Well, I call that an option because I think a lot of people choose it. But it's so patently false that it doesn't really deserve to be called an option. The mystery of evil is that, in the end, Death *will* face us, and will ask to see our papers. What we see in Jesus, as he willingly faces the power of Death, is a steadfast refusal to allow the encounter to be on Death's terms. Three times he replies with the Word of God, letting *God's* judgment be pronounced against his enemy. These words he has made his own. We must do the same in this Lenten warfare, this victorious fast.  
*Fr Philip*