

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Drawing Water

I learned to drink bottled water in Italy. I suppose I thought it was a silly fad at first, and ostentatiously ordered jugs from the tap, regularly contracting gastro-enteritis in the process (amazing numbers of tourists stick rigorously to bottled water to avoid this sad result, only to come unstuck by asking for ice-cubes full of unholy bacilli). Walking through the dry, incandescent atmosphere of Rome, one comes to yearn for the appealing *ssssh* of one's bottle of fizzy water being opened at the start of a shaded luncheon. We need to yearn.

The Pride Of Plumbed-In People

We who have "proper plumbing" come to lose the sense of the miraculous that belongs to water. I know an ancient Umbrian shrine, which consists of a series of clear pools by a country road. The water is so transparent, you can see fish, and the weeds that grow on its bed, with perfect clarity; what makes it magic is its reflection of the trees and the sky, and of course of our faces as we gaze into its cool depths. No wonder it was a place of pagan worship for centuries before Christianity arrived. It would be a lot easier to explain Baptism to people if they came to water in such places, instead of thinking of it so casually as the regular, expected reality that obediently spouts through the taps whenever we choose, slightly smelling of chemicals. How can we make good the losses brought about by our cushioned world, bolstered as it is by expensive industrial technology, yet constantly separating us from the poetry of being alive?

Have Some Sense, Father!

No-one, of course, could want to retreat from the gift of clean water. But I for one would love to experience the joy that belongs to water, and not take it so for granted as we do. So I'm glad that I have been as thirsty as I have, and known the sheer, unforgettable joy of cold water in the heat of the day. I think it is that memory that makes the story of the Well of Jacob so powerful for me today: the hot smell of acres of sand, the sense that the sun is at its height, and the mysterious knowledge that, deep beneath our feet, the water is quietly lurking, cool and far, awaiting the cabled pail that will draw it up to us. Even the reaching-down of that sturdy bucket seems to me to speak of a descent into mystery, to the dark place where life is quietly waiting.

Fasting: Artificial Drought

The Lenten fast is a willing experience of hunger; today's Gospel is a voluntary visit to thirst. Both states belong to poverty, and also to humility, in that they remind us how pathetically dependent we are. Poverty that's chosen is not the affliction it is when it's forced on us. Quite the reverse: it's a declaration of independence, expressing our power over the weakness of our condition. In some way we are refusing to be enslaved when we suspend the dictat of the body. The message of desire that comes to us then is a deep one. Desires that are satisfied are stopped then and there; they are silenced, stilled, like a baby who has fallen asleep at the breast. Desires that are prolonged can deepen, and refine themselves.

Researching Our Desires

It is an often-expressed belief that desire comes in layers. What appears to be a simple desire is actually a front for something much greater. That is why the quick satisfaction of our desires so often isn't effective, or is disappointing: very often we feel we haven't touched the heart of the matter. At its worst this becomes the experience of an addict, who cannot descend lower than the endless succession of drinks or fixes which never stop the longing, never deliver the true peace they seem to promise. We must not allow such a fixation to trap us. We cannot want to be dragged along day after day feeding ourselves with unsatisfaction, like this poor woman who has married and lost five husbands. There is a more radical view, a way to discover what it is that we are really after. To put it another way, the well we want to plumb lies very deep. *As the deer yearns for running streams, so my soul yearns for God, the God of my life.* Tapwater, I suggest, doesn't help us here. The living water Christ promises us needs a more primitive, harder edge of thirst, the longing for a deeper gift than mere water. It is to find our way to such depths that the Church asks us to fast in these days.
Fr Philip