

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Sending, Peace, Pardon

As a boy I used to be a sucker for errands. After school my grandma used to send me for a milk loaf and 10 Guards (children were sold cigarettes in those evil days). Then old ladies used to waylay me to post their letters or run up to the off-licence (I'd better stop specifying). Being sent on someone else's errand may be an annoyance or an interruption. But to realise that we are on a *mission* (all the time) is to discover the meaning of our life. Mere errands can be trivial, and founded on the needs or desires of another, and we can react impatiently. To discover an "errand" which relates us to all reality is to find an entry into joy. Meeting the risen Christ, the Gospel tells us today, gives us our *mission*.

Heralds Of Peace

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of messengers of peace! carols Isaiah's Book of Consolation. Jesus, whose pierced feet are the sign of his identity, announces *Peace* as the first-fruits of Easter; peace with God and with each other, peace with our nature and all the created cosmos, a flowing sense of harmony and beatitude which lies beyond the ravages of death, which sweeps away all the pointless barriers of misunderstanding and meanness. God, the almighty Creator, the tireless rescuer, the impatient lover, will have his way at last, and his love for us will make us whole, and one. The mission is to proclaim to the world this message of peace, for those far away and those close at hand, for the abandoned as well as the beloved, the simple as much as the wise. This errand is no distraction from any human agenda. It is the amplification of every hope, the consolidation of every interest, the fulfilment of every desire.

The Last Shall Be First

The wounds of Jesus are so eloquent in this scene of the Church's birthday. He always said that the least will be the greatest, and the last shall be first, and the poor will be laughing, the hungry full fed. So it is to the wounded that the Gospel is directed by the wounded hands of Christ. No earthly harm is to separate us from the joy of this mission: least of all sin, which is solemnly put under the power of the Church in this amazing Gospel. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Peace at last, reconciliation for all the world's divisions and failures.

"For Those Whose Sins You Retain..."

...they are retained." I can understand the impact of Jesus' mission to forgive the sins of the world, and his commissioning of the disciples to be ministers of forgiveness. There has been heavy debate about this: are the disciples commissioned because they are the first Christian ministers, or because they are the first Christians? We would all say that Christians have been commanded to forgive sins, and to do this to the point of perfection. But how could all Christians be commanded to *retain* sins? Surely this can only mean that there is a ministry higher than the interpersonal forum, a ministry by which sins can be *judged*; Jesus himself, in the story of the man born blind, accepts his worship, and denounces the deliberate blindness of the Pharisees (*Since you claim to be sighted, your guilt remains.*) This isn't "politically correct", and the Church has not been loved for the denouncing of sin; yet where the Church is held to have failed most notoriously, it has always involved the accusation that the Church has failed to denounce evil. *Where was the Church in Nazi Germany?* The question certainly needs answering. But let it be said that those who attack the Church's silence in such areas can be pretty selective about listening to the Church's denunciations in areas closer to home. The truth is, we would like the Church to denounce what we think and feel to be hateful; but we are loth to listen if the Church's denunciation descends on our own short-cuts and derelictions. This is something the Church must put up with, and putting-up with weakness requires the Holy Spirit's strength. Just as the forgiveness of sins implies carrying the Cross of sin, so denouncing evil can bring the forces of evil to bear on those who do it. These things are only bearable because of the gift of the Holy Spirit that is called "perseverance" or "long-suffering". It's not very romantic, but it is a brotherly virtue, and truly the gift of this Spirit of sons and daughters, who preserves us, even while we are at war against evil, in the peace of Christ.

Fr Philip