

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

My Servant, To The Ends Of The Earth

Simone Weil was a very great and holy person, who lived until death with her heart set against the Nazi attempt on her people, the Jews. She meditated on the mystery of evil, and saw it most clearly in the dull, blind, senseless, killing misery she called "affliction". Martyrs, she said, do not know it; they die for their burning faith, which sustains and illuminates them. Affliction, by contrast, brings with it no light, no meaning; it is a blunt instrument which senselessly flattens humanity, with no redeeming significance to lighten the blows.

The Affliction Of The Cross

In the Cross, Simone believed, God the Father flung Jesus to the far end of the universe, until the greatest sinner and the most darkened sufferer saw more of the Father than Jesus did. This was the cup of affliction which Jesus drained to the dregs. Denied the light of God, he knew further than any of us the darkness of God's absence. This means two things: first, that however much we suffer, we know that he has out-suffered us; but more: the further we fall into the dark, *the nearer we come to him in the uttermost grief of the Cross*. It is as if God has surrounded us within a comprehensive embrace; even as we fall from the Father, we are awaited by the Son in his dereliction. In order to understand this, it was necessary for us to watch the drama of the Passion, and to see the tears of the Son of God as he stayed faithful in affliction.

Suffering Servant

Last week we contemplated Jesus at his baptism, confirmed by God as his beloved, chosen Son. This week we turn to him as the Servant, and remember that this service will involve suffering. You can't separate these two things. If you enter into affliction unsupported by love, it has the power to break your heart. If you try to love, but refuse to be afflicted, your love will be worthless. So today the prophet speaks of a task that will send the Servant of God *to the ends of the earth*. It isn't enough for him to gather the lost sheep of Israel, to see his role within the People of God. The true disciple of the Father will go to the farthest end of the earth, beyond the most lost of all humanity. Then the salvation he proclaims will reach its destination.

With Him To The End

The disciples who were with Jesus in his ministry could not see the meaning of what he did, the way he was travelling, least of all the end to which it led. That is why they all run away and leave him to it. They didn't accompany him *to the ends of the earth*. When Jesus promised to revisit them, they received a special gift, which prepared them for the unveiling of the Paschal Mystery - only totally clear to them in the Pentecostal moment which turned them from disciples to apostles, with a mandate to carry the word to the ends of the earth. Part of this ministry, undoubtedly, means for several of the apostles, the completion of their journey *to the end* - following of Jesus in martyrdom. In turn, we may not receive that visitation of the risen Lord which turned round the first disciples. But we are asked to go to the end with him, as we carry the burdens of our life to their ending. In this way, we can see a special privilege in the shape of our lives, which closely follow the path Jesus trod: he had no-one to follow, except the will of his Father. But I think we live our lives as a conscious effort to reinterpret the Gospel anew. Just as Jesus responded to the call of God as he met the sick and the sinful, the people on the edge of human acceptability, so we travel on the marches between belief and unbelief, trying at every moment to choose in the spirit of Christ, to make the Gospel count. There is a place in the world's history that is ours, where we are. *We* must be evangelists in that place.

Fr Philip