

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Message Unfolds

Reading the Beatitudes last week was the first course of our listening to the Sermon on the Mount (we read it every three years, and we'll follow it this year until Lent interrupts it in 4 weeks' time). Today's helping tells us some heartening things, but they bring awesome responsibility.

### Feeling Stressed?

These days we often complain that we are stressed. At the same time, people of a certain age announce robustly that they never had *time* to have a nervous breakdown – much less the inclination. Is this fair? Are we all turning into wimps, wilting before the common lot of humanity? I doubt it. But we aren't helped to bear our burdens by a strong sense of community, or by the founding fact of community: *communion*. Has there ever been a time when society was truly Christian, truly sustained by the fact of salvation? The more I read about the past, about the history of the Church, the less I think so.

### The Victorian House

A century ago, ordinary people across the world were loaded with burdens we would find unbearable today. They carried them with whole hearts. Remember that revealing televised experiment which returned a modern family to the conditions of Victorian life? They were brave, and they needed to be. They showed us how much we take for granted. But I felt they also gave us a glimpse of a life closer to the human condition, a life of heavy weights and slow processes, of care and humility: certainly the zip-fastener life we lead doesn't inspire us to give ourselves spontaneously, uncomplainingly; we have deadlines, we make dates, we have to fly. It was into that slow, small world that the First World War arrived as a bombshell. We little knew what it would do to us when it began. It showed how the apparently close community of English village life, and its assumed social structures and loyalties, were all paper-thin, often nothing but a frill of false delicacy. It did nothing to defend the poor or the young. That world, as one poet put it, "swallowed its children whole" in a long series of dreadful slaughters, which no-one had deserved. I well remember the last of its widows, still alive in my youth, and the old maiden ladies who had no-one left to marry. I don't think we have truly absorbed all the message of those days. The

injustices and the false peace after the First World War made inevitable the Second, and the Cold War that followed it; the harm it all did was made clear to me when we showed ourselves incapable of rebirth when at last the Iron Curtain disappeared. Of all the disastrous defeats of the twentieth century, none is so damning as the one that spoiled the 1990's. When we should have begun to build a new world, cleansed of its wretched past, we threw away the moment of grace by allowing the worst of capitalism and criminality to flood eastwards, afflicting the victims of seventy years of Godlessness with even worse poverty. Watch the events through which we are now passing: doesn't our "war against terrorism" sound awfully like "the war to end all wars" of 1914? We seem to learn nothing; we will repeat our awesome lesson until we do.

### Salt Of The Earth

What we need is the new heart and new spirit promised in the prophecies. That is the salt we need to cleanse, to purify, and to stop the rot of the world. Every now and again something happens that is full of grace, with just that free, unforced flavour of loving humanity that gives life back its savour; and then we know what has been afflicting us. Think of the Afghan people, and what they have had to swallow in the last century. *Their* poisonous cup has never stopped filling up: no victory parades for them, no peaceful flourishing. In recent years the Russians' departure ended twenty years of awesome violence, only to bring in the Taliban, and the poison of hatred and prejudice. Then they were rocked with our euphemistic "daisy cutters", which shattered their ruins into fragments. Now they are racked with civil disorder, forgotten by the world except as a potential source of terrorism. Let's keep them in our sights, and pray for their future; let's prepare ourselves for the moment of grace God will surely bring, when we shall be able to come forward with the Gospel of peace, and offer something of grace to the world, which will taste no longer of spilt blood and cordite, but of trust, of community, and of mutual respect and love.

*Fr Philip*