

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What A Pickle

One of the memories we will each have of our childhood is of a competent adult coming to our rescue, when we have run out of answers. It still happens to us in adult life, that we will occasionally become actually frightened of a mess we've got into: the sudden need of a plumber, or a doctor, or a fast car, to prevent an even worse predicament. It is immensely helpful if someone recognisably sensible comes into the situation with confidence and power. Our disaster now appears as a manageable hitch, and we experience a surge of relief.

God The Father

It would, perhaps, have been possible for God to save humanity in that mode. He could have visited us in power, and with twelve legions of angels he could have righted us. He could have come in like a parent running to a collapsing infant, gathered us up, and romped home with us, turning our tears into laughter as he went. But he didn't do this. Often when we pray, we want him to. *Snatch us from our foes, we pray, make with a thunderbolt, change the rules, stop the world, I want to get off.* God is silent, and some of us decide *he's not there, he doesn't work, it's all a fable.* But if we consult his word to us, we can see that the pattern is truly consistent. *Let the cup pass!* – and God is silent. *Why have you forsaken me?* We have found the Way of the Cross. Faith is trusting God in that silence, when we find our prayer blocked, and our eyes facing disaster. God doesn't come in like a staff-nurse and pick up the pieces, humming a little tune. Instead, he comes to *suffer grievously at the hands of elders and chief priests and scribes.* Our proper reaction, on this Way, is to pick up the Cross and go with him. He is on the Way of God.

God the Son

Wanting to be a follower of Christ is a bit of a mystery. Some Americans preach that the following of Christ is the only sure way to prosperity, and that bank-balances and prayer rise together. This is such manifest nonsense that you'd think it unsaleable; but people *want* to believe it so much that they will ignore all the evidence to the contrary. What's odd is that they think this can be supported by the Gospel – the one which talks about the beloved Son carrying the Cross! Here is his message: *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must renounce himself.*

Renouncing Self

I don't think our age can see any sense in this phrase. Denying, or surrendering one's selfhood looks like absurdity in a generation obsessed with "being yourself"; we have come to feel that self-expression and self-fulfilment are the equivalent of a good life, and renouncing self is therefore as incomprehensible as suicide. This is the same word which will be used of Peter when he "denies" Jesus during the Passion: it means *disowning* or *disclaiming one's connection* with another. Here, the word is used startlingly: the disciple must disclaim his connection *with himself!* Paul tells his people in Corinth: *You are not your own; you have been bought and paid for.* It is as if Jesus wants us to break every link which binds us to our self. One scholar suggests the Lord is saying that we should regard ourselves as *people who are already condemned to death*, and think of our life in this world as *already finished.* How does that make you feel? It certainly puts the mortgage into a new context. No wonder Jesus addresses these words, not to a crowd, but to the disciples. I doubt if they'd go down very well on the telly-evangelists' lunchtime Prosperity Hour.

This Is My Body

But these words are the only key for unlocking the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus is given to us as a gift, because he no longer clings to his selfhood. His love has become sacrificial; and this frees him to be the Father's gift to us. That surely is the ultimate meaning of the gift of his body and blood. To human eyes flesh and blood constitute the person's presence in the world. To turn that presence into total gift is almost unimaginable to us, because our greatest generosity always envisages a self which is partly retained and not given away. For this reason we fall short of divine life, which is an eternal and utter outpouring of the three Persons of the Trinity to each other. We have much to learn!

Fr Philip