

## THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

### That Their Gates Be Closed No More

In the description of the Holy City which fills the 60<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, the prophet says: *Your gates will always be open, never closed either day or night, for the riches of the nations to be brought to you, and their kings to be let in.* This royal traffic recalls the coming to Solomon of the Queen of Sheba, whose fabulous wealth burned itself into Hebrew memory. The same thought returns at the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation (21:25). The gates are a symbol of protection and of the rule of law; even today, you need a physical barrier, closed once a year, to preserve a right of privacy. In our first reading this Sunday, Isaiah speaks of God using the Persian Great King, Cyrus, whom he calls *God's Messiah*, to force gateways before God, so that they may be closed no more. *Good news – or bad?*

#### Enter His Gates With Praise

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on his donkey, the gates stood open to receive him, and this shows the ambivalence of the gates. They represent the need for security: but at the best, they stand open, *because there is no threat.* They are the perfect response to Jesus' mount: he rides in peace, they open their gates in welcome. But it isn't always so.

#### The Barricaded World

Europe, the largest trading community on earth, is constantly holding meetings to review the state of barriers, which allegedly stand between us and the less fortunate part of humanity which lives elsewhere. Do these barriers accord to the will of God? I'm quite unsure. *Does the misfortune of those born outside them accord to the will of God?* Assuredly not. In that sense, although we may have a perfect right to barricade our continent under human law, we have to question our right to do so under the law of God. Jesus said that *if anyone asks, we must give, and if anyone wants to borrow, we must not turn away.* Ghastly economics? Sure. But does God not understand economics? Our world is obsessed with electric fences and searchlights and watch-towers against intrusion. We know we have to work hard to keep our wealth; we also hope that we can *refuse*, and *turn away*, and still keep our humanity. We wouldn't like to find ourselves behind the fence with a lot of inhuman people. Therefore we need the fence, to keep those others out, and so that, in fact, we don't have to think about them too much.

Soon, we think that the very presence of the fence is preventing us from helping them; they're too far away, and we can't reach them. A pity.

#### The Towers Of Jerusalem

The psalmist calls on us to walk the walls of Jerusalem counting the towers, getting the sense of the strength of the walls. *So the Lord surrounds his people*, he carols, *now and forever.* Well, maybe that's true: but follow the comparison through: the walls of Jerusalem don't have a good history of reliability. They kept tumbling down and letting the enemy in! Besides, at the end of the Bible, *the gates stand open day and night to receive the wealth of the nations*; the walls are no longer of significance. *Ah yes*, we say, *but in our case the wealth would be flowing out, not in, if we tried to do without our barricades.* Really? Do we believe, in practice, that euros, dollars, and the dear old pound sterling are worth more than *people*? *Of course not. You're twisting my words.* But if we open our gates, it is *people* who come in, *people* who come to us in throngs, riding on camels and dromedaries: your daughters coming from afar, your sons being tenderly carried. *That's what I mean. And they breed like rabbits. Quick, shut the door. Pretend we're out.* Ah me. No wonder God so often dispossessed his people in Old Testament times, reducing them to slavery, so that unlikely messiahs like Cyrus could be raised up to humiliate them. Back to the drawing-board! What price the faith of Christendom, when our hearts are governed by gold, when money is still the bottom line on every page? *You've got to live in the real world.* True. The only question is about which reality God lives in. The implication of Cyrus is that God's world isn't the one we map at all; our city isn't the City of God, and it can only ever become so by our stilling the voices of ambition, and fear, and greed which so often prevail in its history, and make room for "a city designed, and founded, and built by God"; then we can "give to God what belongs to God", and be at peace with him. *Fr Philip*