

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## O Gates, Lift High Your Heads

The image of an entrance is a religious one. The door of the house was a place of religious ritual for our forefathers: the Jews still keep the holy words of the Shema in their little shrine in the doorpost, sanctifying their arrivals and departures with the words of their creed. It is a place of meeting, for those inside the house and for those who arrive, it is the border between the private and the public, it is where we show our faces. It is also a place of farewells, departures, the boundary between family and the world, the jumping-off place for birds flying the nest. In some way, the doorstep is a place of great changes, decisions, and encounters.

### Open To Me The Gates Of Holiness

The portals of a great building are also places for ceremony. The Gothic Cathedrals used them as a frame for every kind of sculptural and decorative display. The act of entering a church, after all, is a deliberate step in search of the Divine. The transition is a moment for sensitivity. When we open the door of a church, something must open in our heart; and there are ways of behaving that should be relinquished there. John Donne spoke of his last illness as a standing in the doorway of a holy room, where he would be made God's music: *I tune the Instrument, here, at the doore, And what I must doe then, think here before.* We must discard our armour at that threshold.

### Palm Sunday

This is of all entries the most vital, as we hear the call to enter Jerusalem with Jesus. If we have any love for Christ, any perception of the work of God, we should summon it to the centre of our life today, and make ready for what is to come. How should we think of "what we must do there"? The crowd around us is shouting "hosanna" and waving triumphant palms. It is customary to hesitate about joining in; after all, this is the eventual mob that will shout for his crucifixion. But then, next Friday, we'll be asked to join in that as well. What is the Church asking of us, in giving us a share in these contradictory calls? Surely we aren't just extras in some Western, who can appear in white hats or black hats, as required? Is the Church accepting the divided hearts of its people, and making us play both rôles in the drama of our redemption? If so, where does God figure in the Passover Plot?

### What Part Will God Take?

Here is the deepest mystery of all. What is God doing in the drama of Holy Week? As usual, nothing is predictable. The crowd appears to think something dramatic is about to happen. They would no doubt have been gratified by the *twelve legions of angels* (surely one of Jesus' lighter remarks) that pointedly *don't* turn up to save the Son of David. If anyone expects to see any divine fireworks in the sky they will be disappointed. Even when his Son beseeches him to change the plan, *God is silent.* The slow realisation is that God is behind the whole of the play, even within each of its players. We think of Jesus being "handed over" to die by the traitor Judas, by Caiaphas the priest, by Pilate the prefect. But behind and above all these people, *God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.* That is the "handing over" in which we find ourselves sharing, as disciples, as the crowd. Indeed, when Peter draws his sword to prevent his being handed over, he reminds us of the Peter whom Jesus called "Satan", the Peter who refused to listen to the prediction of the Passion. Pilate and Caiaphas and even Judas are working with God, and the chief disciple is "an obstacle". When Pilate hands Jesus over, it is to his own soldiery. But in another sense he is giving him to the crowds who cry *Crucify him.* It seems that in the deepest place, God and the crowds call for the same thing; and Jesus himself insists that the Cross is necessary, even when the disciples ask him to think again. The willingness of the crowds to call for the Cross, and the will of God, may be at opposite ends of the universe. Nevertheless, there is only one universe, and there is only one fate Jesus will meet. We don't contemplate it from afar: we take part in it, as the ignorant crowd did, as blind Caiaphas, as fearful Pilate. God is alive, is a man, and has put himself at the mercy of the human community, with all its unworthiness. This is the mysterious truth into which we enter today by the gates of Jerusalem.  
*Fr Philip*