

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Got Any Joy?

I'm in need of some joy. It's been cold, grey and miserable, I'm a bit tired, and I don't get any younger. I feel a bit like the ancient misery, sad Ecclesiastes, who turned a bleary eye on what was left of his life and said, *These give me no pleasure*. Then, typically, amid these wintry thoughts, the Church comes breezing in and tells me *Rejoice*. Hm.

Get Stuffed

More cotton wool in the cheeks, breadcrumbs in the chicken, and pack out the larder, pop some corks, make a feast. All very well, but we know it doesn't work like that. Do you want another dreary stuffing feast? Followed by a morning with a hangover, three sacks of waste, and a faint feeling that we've forgotten how to be happy? Real feasts aren't made outside the person: they proceed from within, they are the outward expression of a joy that springs from the heart. Suppose the heart just feels rusty and down? What's the way forward?

Dear Mother....

One of the ancient titles for Mary is *causa nostrae laetitiae* – “cause of our joy”. She has this title (and all the others) because she was filled with the grace of becoming the mother of God. In our meditation on Advent, we can be visited by Mary. She becomes aware of an archangelic presence, she is caught up in the divine plan, she hears spoken to her the mighty words of promise which have inspired her people; she finds the pegs of her little tent plucked out, and the dimensions of her life blown almost beyond sight, by the still small voice which has prescribed for her a destiny pitched between earth and heaven, which will fill her with God, and make her the mother of a new humanity. The patriarch, Jacob, awoke from a dream full of promises, and said: *Truly, God is in this place, and I did not know it!* I imagine Mary had sometimes felt the meaningless emptiness described above, even though Gabriel calls her *full of grace*. How can we come to know what she came to know, or hear the communication of angels, or sense the grace in which God has set us by his visitation? We've got to find, not an reasonable excuse for a blow-out, but a sufficient *reason* for joy. Only in this way can

we move out of our buried prison, and find the heart for a feast.

Paradox Of Poverty

How can it happen that the poor are blessed? The advertisers, whose business it is to get it right, don't think so. They are ladling us with their duskiest inks and images: the gilded tray, the thick chocolate, the glinting firelight under the marble mantle, the amber fluid cradled in superb crystal, the warm darkness of wealthy intimacy. We'll conspire to clear the streets of the homeless, in an operation of “Christmas” compassion that might make us feel better ourselves; I'd far rather they were inside, warm and well-fed, than not: but just for Christmas? You could *price* it, but what is such a “Christmas” worth, in any other than economic terms?

I Am Not The Christ

John the Baptist gives us a good example when he declines to usurp the rôle of the Messiah, or Elijah, or any of the figures who were expected to signal the end of time, and the dawning of eternal joy. His refusal to take the centre stage must teach us the humility of Advent. This feast will come as a gift, not as an acquisition; we need reminding, that not everything is there to be purchased. Christian Joy is not a commodity reserved for the discriminating shopper. But that doesn't make it unreal. *Make a straight way for the Lord* is more about making space than about stuffing it full of the gear of festivity. Truly, we're far more likely to lose the real joy because we're too full, than because we're too poor. So even though lots of people may offer to sell us joy, we shouldn't be ready to accept. We might seek instead that emptiness for which God was searching, when he sent his angel to speak to a virgin in a poor country. In her readiness and simplicity, she had room for joy to be born.

Fr Philip