

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Their Enemies Burned Down The Temple of God, Demolished The Walls Of Jerusalem, Set Fire To All Its Palaces, And Destroyed Everything Of Value In It

These dispassionate words record the delivery of the most crushing blow ever to befall the People of God. The beginning of the Babylonian Exile saw the systematic destruction of all that they held most dear. It is interesting to note that this disaster emanated from Babylon, which is slowly being excavated – and, I’ve heard, rebuilt – inside the borders of modern Iraq. One sometimes feels that little changes over the millennia. The events guaranteed that the heart would be torn out of the people as a nation with a common memory. They would never be whole again, and the presence in the sacred columns of the Psalter of Pss 74, 79 and 137 are only the tip of an iceberg which lurks beneath the surface of Jewish memory. Every other loss or downfall was only a foretaste or an aftershock of this supreme cataclysm.

Holy Saturday

On the day after the Crucifixion, alone in the whole year, the altars of the Christian church stand naked and deserted. This is not a spare moment that no-one has thought to use for a ceremony. Ancient writers speak of the altar as “fasting” on that day, when the Son of God has gone into exile, when the powers have united to destroy him. And this means, amongst other things, that I never have the chance to speak about Holy Saturday, and I feel that people fill Holy Saturday with secular business, as if the Church had no use for them on this day, as if there is no spiritual meaning in this most sabbatical of all Sabbaths. If that is happening, we are gravely mistaken. It is the very emptiness of our hands on this day that gives us the great symbol of our human condition. There is no longer any room for doubt on this day: the one we had saluted as *Christ* and *Son of David* is in his grave. That one fact has taken over everything we had previously hoped or believed. Our religion has become bereaved, and the tomb of our hopes is sealed in the midst of us. It is as if we too have gone into Exile, and everything we look at speaks to us

of the end of our powers and the end of our hope.

Isaiah, Prophet of God

The prophet had the decisive insight which illuminated the darkness of the Exile. He realised that one who had given Israel into slavery was God himself. This unspeakable thought took years to form in his mind, but at last it crystallised out, and we can read it in the chapters between Is. 40 and 55. Far from a sign of the defeat of God, the Exile was a work of God’s power; even the foreign kings who led them away were God’s tools and ministers, were executing his will. And there it is, in today’s first reading: *Until this land has enjoyed its Sabbath rest, until seventy years have gone by, it will keep Sabbath throughout the days of its desolation.*

No Facile Gospel

So we must never seek to hurtle from the Cross to Easter, in an easy transition to joy which does not pass through the emptiness of Holy Saturday. This year won’t be different: the Church’s injunction will be observed, that no ritual will gather the people (*they burned the Temple of God*) until the sun is setting on the Sabbath. But I hope we’ll find time, amidst the Bank Holiday shopping, for a time of quiet acknowledgment of the sealed tomb, and of the waiting on God, whose impossible deed will turn on its head the world that crucifies the Lord of Glory.

Fr Philip