

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

What Have You Ever Done For Me?

There's a great line in the first reading this Sunday, well worth our attention: God says: *You have not troubled yourself, Israel, on my behalf: instead you have burdened me with your sins.* This is a very precise account of where we are with God. We haven't sought positively to do God's will; rather we make contact with God when we have failed to live the covenant with him, so that our lives have fallen from grace, and we need a redeemer. We're a bit like a dysfunctional family, which only realises itself in a crisis: a mother and father called to the police station, or only hearing from their children when their resources have run out. George Herbert thought this was part of God's plan: he makes God say of his creature, Man, *Let him be rich, and weary: that at least, If goodness lead him not, yet weariness May toss him to my breast.* I've met many in difficult straits, who haven't prayed for years, and who dare not pray now, for fear of rejection, for the shame of coming for help only when the times have turned sour.

Burdened With Your Sins

And what about God: is he the sort of Father who wants his children's glittering prizes, their devotion, their power to reflect glory, and not their grief and need? Hardly. God wants *us*, in all our poverty and failure; in a very real sense he wants us in our sins, in our un-lived life, in our helplessness. He is, at the beginning, and always, the Lord and Giver of Life. So he says of himself today: *I it is, I it is, who must blot out everything and not remember your sins.* It is as if he says: *you only know me as one who forgives, your coming to me is always coloured by the experience of sin.* This is a tremendous accusation; and it grounds our reading of the Gospel for today, where a man comes to Jesus only because he is carried there: incapable of movement for himself, he has to be lowered through the roof. Jesus' first words to him are unexpected: *My child, your sins are forgiven.* The implications are enormous, but the first in my mind is that Jesus sees the first and greatest need of the paralysed human being before him, not as the freeing of his movements, but as the melting down of his sins. How should we think of these sins?

Sin – The Lesser Of Two Goods

Our endless human tendency to think that evil is a positive reality, set up by some evil being in opposition to God, is always getting in our way. I read a very good account of evil, written by Fr Herbert McCabe, who sadly died recently. He wrote: *"We have, through God's love, the grace to choose freely to love him. If we choose instead some lesser good, at the expense of loving God...we do that too of our own free choice; but there is no such thing as an anti-grace, an inspiration of God by which we choose evil. When we sin it is entirely our choice of something instead of God's friendship. Sin is sin, not because of the thing we positively choose – the human satisfaction, or pleasure, or power; it is sin because of what we fail to choose, what we sacrifice for the sake of a minor good."* So sin is a falling-short, a poverty of choice, blind to what's best and most perfect; it is the worst possible taste! We ought to pray fervently for the grace to sense our own dignity, to realise the wonderful power that waits to answer our prayer. Making choices in life is like shopping: we need the wisdom to read the whole catalogue before we commit ourselves to buy; because there is only one life, one soul, for us to spend, and we must make sure that we invest it "where true joys may be found", and not in some dead-end reality which dazzles us briefly, and burns out. The sect called Manichees believed that there was a kind of anti-god, responsible for all evil, and a good god responsible for all good. The truth about evil is somewhat sadder; there is one God, and there are people who are paralysed in their choices, who need to be carried into his presence.
Fr Philip