

Where The Gospel Shines

I wonder how many people actually *sense* that the world we live in is saved. It's one thing to *learn* it is; another to *believe* it is; but to sense it so clearly that we can say *I know it*, is what I'd like - for me and for all.

This Place Condemned

There are lots of people walking around in England today who sense that the world is damned, or maybe that they're damned themselves. "Quiet despair" is a speciality of our times. Where does it come from? Who delivers the blow, that turns people to despair? For some, it may be a drip-feed of small doses of poison, as negative and unhelpful responses are fed into their unresisting ear over a lifetime. The systematic stamping-out of hope is not too difficult for a determined operator, since most of us have plenty of space for negative response of our own. We know about death long before it appears to us, and need very little softening-up. Some others receive the blow wholesale, in a great specific onslaught which seems ever afterwards to have delivered a fatal attack to all hope of joy. But whether we put a time and place on the realisation, or just accumulate it gradually, most of us will not claim to be incurable optimists, and will know a grim fatalism at key points of disaster or loss.

We Need Conversion

Therefore the growth of Christian faith for everyone is a matter of conversion, of turning-round, of contradicting the past and its lethal messages, above or below the waterline, above or below the belt. It is one of the marks of divine exactitude in the Gospel, that it should be delivered to us by a condemned man. In this regard, the words of Jesus to the women of Jerusalem come to mind: *Weep, not for me, but for yourselves and for your children*; Jesus knew, as he received the condemnation to death, that he stood in the same path as those around him, that those who now counted him as singled-out and marked for death were under the same sentence. He also knew that in going to death he was where he had come to be, where he was destined to be by his Father. At that moment he may have felt himself to be the only converted person in the world, a man

with no disciples, with no-one to understand him; even those women who wept didn't understand. Only the convict who shared his crucifixion lifts a corner of the blindfold, and finds a way to recognise the Kingdom that was opening to Jesus: he asks humbly that he be remembered, *when you enter your Kingdom*. We can hear the surge of consolation that comes to Jesus at that moment (*there is more joy in heaven when a sinner repents* - literally, *changes heart* - *than over ninety-nine righteous who need not*). So in that ghastly moment, Jesus can promise paradisiacal happiness to a condemned criminal, from a heart that had drunk to the dregs the cup of human condemnation.

The Gospel Stands!

The message then delivered will never be revoked. It has written, on the crumpled page of that criminal human heart, in the hand of the Creator, the message of eternal hope. It doesn't really matter from what distance we hear it; all distance has been cancelled by the presence, in that far reach, of the Son of God. This is the revelation of the Trinity. Our act of faith, like that of the man who was hanged beside Jesus, may seem to be in the teeth of the evidence, a cry in the dark; but it is still justified, even guaranteed, by the one who receives it, faithfully present wherever we are in darkness or despair. It doesn't show itself so clearly amongst the righteous, settled, holy and observant folk *who have no need of repentance*, as it does among the *ragged noise and mirth of thieves and murderers* where Jesus found his final earthly destination. If you have anything like *that* frame to put the Gospel in, you will see it shine. *Fr Philip*