

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## On The Eighth Day

If ever a Gospel chooses itself, today's is the one. The little group of Jews that arrived in Jerusalem with Jesus has had a frightful experience: we can only guess how they must have felt, watching him turning over the furniture in the Temple, sensing the fright and tumult he was causing among the priests and the Sanhedrin, sharing the last days when Jesus was unable to go about openly, and knowing that the Passover was approaching, not festively and freely, as it usually does, but portentously, ominously: these sensations would burn themselves into the memory. You know how we never forget when there's a funeral at Christmas; the incongruity of the hearse passing through streets festooned with coloured lights is unforgettable. They would always remember the arrest in the garden, just before the feast of liberation, even if the plot had worked, and Jesus had truly been eliminated at his death.

### God Had Other Plans

*But Jesus, unaccountably, was not eliminated.* The statement needs a lot of qualification, but that was the net effect of the Resurrection. It wasn't, as some adversaries, and some heretics, tried to suggest, that he didn't really die, or that he wasn't really condemned, or that he had made special arrangements for his work to be carried on. He accepted arrest, he acknowledged the court, he made no bid to escape, and he paid the price with his lifeblood; but what became clear afterwards was that none of these things were the point of what happened. Human motives were in play, and seemed to be in the driving-seat: Caiaphas decreed his rubbing-out, Pilate stamped his death-warrant, the soldiers did their grisly work. But a much quieter, nearly invisible, totally sovereign power was actually at work in this passion and death; and slowly, in a process that is still unfolding today, the realisation dawned that something had happened in which the human motives had been negligible, and the divine motives had been paramount. Now the incongruity of the crucifixion/festival paradox started to shine in people's minds. Pennies dropped, mysteries were unveiled, old words suddenly took on new meanings, and people were busily re-evaluating their judgments, withdrawing their conclusions, and going back to the drawing-board. Reading the Scripture, it seems that all these happenings

came at high speed. I'd suggest that they took a lot longer than we're inclined to think, because I do think they are still happening today, in the lives of all who have sniffed the fresh air of Eastertide, and entered into the experience of this springtime of souls.

### Watch This Space

The Eleven become all-important in this stage of the story: that is why we read the *Acts of the Apostles* through Eastertide. They were the ones who had least understood the cross. More paradox! If they could have stopped it, they would have done so: if they had, the history of the world since 50 AD would quite simply not have happened. That is why, in order for the plan of God to succeed, the disciples had to be got rid of (*Get behind me, Satan - you think like a man, not like God*). In Mark they run away. In John they are dismissed by Jesus himself (*Let these others go*). The people who have to steer Jesus' story forward are *his enemies*. It is they who have the disposition required by God's plan: only when they have pursued their motives to the end can Jesus be the Christ of God. Now the deed is done, and Jesus has been lifted up, pierced by the lance, and laid in earth, the disciples return to the story, gathered once again, but in united fear more than in faith. They have lost everything, and in this state of total evacuation of their human motives and human meanings, they have been brought by God to an emptiness that can receive the stupendous, transforming experience of the Resurrection. See the paradox again? Only when we are totally on the floor are we ready to be exalted. To *think in God's way* we must have nothing left of human devices and designs.

### Thomas

This explains why the Evangelist reserves for Thomas the crowning act of faith of his Gospel, indeed of the whole New Testament: *My Lord and my God*. He was not with them when Jesus came, and so he is conspicuous among them, the only man who is still fixed to the Cross, fixated in Good Friday. And Jesus does not abandon him to his fate. He returns for him, on the eighth day, and shows him the heart of the paradox. It is the death-wounded hands and side of the living Christ that turn over the fixed grief of Thomas. Each octave, for us too, he comes and stands in our midst, with his gift of peace. *Fr Philip*