

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Let's Start At The First Fruits

I often think of my parents when they were young. There's a photo of my father as a youngster, doing some little task in his future parents-in-law's garden, with their sheepdog Peggy watching him admiringly. I think of their first days of marriage in 1944, my mother expecting my brother's birth, my father in the South Pacific on an aircraft-carrier. I think of their first bleak days of independence, grindingly poor in the aftermath of the war. I remember how precious money was, and how far it had to go. I remember the disaster, the tears, when something vital got broken or lost. The atmosphere was sometimes dreadful, but the days were vitally precious in the making of a marriage. "We didn't have much...." So we knew what we had, in that first love.

### First Fruits

The first reading today is, at first sight, a very odd choice for the First Sunday of Lent. It's the rubric, or instructions, for a religious service, in fact for a harvest festival. It's very old, and it seems to relate to the first days of Israel in the Land of Canaan - that is the first days after they had stopped being nomads and become settlers. It seems that there was a fear from the beginning that they might become self-satisfied, fat, and smug: that they might forget the sacred journey of their pilgrim days, when God brought them out of Egyptian slavery, and wedded them to himself in the desert. These days would be recalled by Hosea the prophet. He shows us God saying, *I will seduce her, and lure her out into the desert, and speak to her heart. Then she will respond to me as she did when she was young, when she came up out of Egypt.* Indeed, Israel got lost in the gifts of plenty, and forgot her faith over and over again. Now I can understand why this reading has been chosen for us; and I think I understand why the first prompting of the Spirit which descended on Jesus at his Baptism is to take him into the desert.

### Wilderness

So here we are in the desert, but remember it's the desert where God first spoke to us, the desert of Abraham's wandering, of Moses' Burning Bush, of the Exodus, of the Covenant at Sinai: an awesome place, but full of a love that is too great for our knowing just yet. We who enjoy the revelation of the Scriptures have much to illuminate the meaning of this

place, enough to make us go there obediently and firmly. *Mary set out as quickly as she could, into the hill-country of Judaea* - into the rocks and peaks of the desert, her mind filled with the message of an angel, her sights fixed on her cousin, who is in her sixth month, and her heart meditating the Magnificat which will burst joyously from her when the two of them meet. Our going into the Lenten desert of fasting is like that: travelling light, with a high heart, filled with promise, ready for joy. We fast from bread that perishes, because we hope for true bread, eternal food. These are the first-fruits of a new-born hope.

### Prayer is our Door to Hope

Praying is the work of hope. Without the hope of sensing the presence of God all religion is dead letters, a mockery of what it should be. We can be soon there, the journey is not long, because the Father does not cease to follow us, even though our eyes are not on him, and our faces not turned towards him. He is very close to us, and when we have cleared our lives of the clutter which burdens them, he will reach out to us, and turn us round to face him. When we have stilled the clamour of our wasted hours, he will speak to us, and we shall respond to him as we did in the beginning, when he called us into being.

### There Will Be Gifts For You

There is something deadening about possession. The person we keep enslaved is not really a person. The assets we pile up in Fort Knox do not enrich us. The display of what we've accumulated brings us no honour. If we find a way to share what we have, that is beautiful, and this beauty is a divine gift: if we are allowed to share what we are, that is even more life-giving, and our lives shine with a further gift. Sometimes we are given a greater grace, *to lay down what we have out of love*; then we enter into sacrifice, which is a yet more mysterious gift. The summit of all this giving is the laying down of our life itself out of love. Then we become like Christ, and the Father loves us as he loves his Son. We have come full-circle, from the poverty of our early love, to a chosen poverty that waits for the fulness of God to be its own. In this way we refuse all other gifts, so as to inherit the whole gift which is God's love alone. There's nothing mean in Lent!  
*Fr Philip*