

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Forgiveness

In my first parish, three decades ago, one of the heaviest days was Saturday, when we had five priest-hours of confessions. You couldn't doubt that the Church was well aware of sin, and that people were quite committed to seeking forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Sin? I See No Sin

Today we are no longer able to say this. One of the worst things you can do, we think, is to make people feel guilty. Curious; with our streets less and less safe, with every kind of iniquity being perpetrated in the political world, with waves of hatred and abuse riding the media and the internet like Horsemen of the Apocalypse, with organised crime in full possession of the drugs market, with multinational business presiding serenely over the daily deaths of thousands, with AIDS and endemic famine threatening whole continents, with family breakdown the natural environment for more than half of such children as manage to be born - surely we are massively in denial, desperately clinging to shreds of self-righteousness woven of self-deception. We could hardly bear to think that anyone is actually responsible for all this. We certainly can't accept that *we* are...much less that *I* am. How have the words "sin" and "confess" been put into the Room 101 of our religion?

Unpalatable truths

In our country the Christian faith used to have an assured place in most people's minds, even if it was a private one. But this has changed. With the collapse of practised religion, people's inner life has been invaded by commercial forces: Christian prayer has yielded its place to all sorts of "experience", running from massage and aromatherapy to drugs and other "states of altered consciousness"; the search for instant gratification has relegated the hard work of holiness to the dustbin of history. We are in extremely competent hands: opened up like kippers to the eye of the exploiter; advertisements can offer the highest spiritual values for sale, with amazing effrontery: you can get security, consolation, and a reason for living from an insurance policy, an insurance policy for your dog, your car, your funeral expenses; from your bathroom, your carpet, your deodorant, your newspaper, your brand of baked beans. "It's so *simple*," we hear,

"just one phone call for peace of mind...." The moment we turn a critical eye on all this, we undeceive ourselves. But "critical" is a nasty word, and it's easier to let it happen. The truth that we should keep a watchful eye on what gets into us, in case something pernicious should lodge in our mind or heart, is unpalatable in a world where softness and comfort are becoming the prime values.

Ever Tried Righteous Indignation?

There is one trace left of rigorous morality: and that's the capacity to detect evil *in others*. If we're losing sight of our own sins, we're making up for it in our contemplation of other people's. The Sunday tabloids look like handbooks for sin-spotters, and every now and again there is a juicy witch-hunt or lynch-mob story which gives us the opportunity to appear as The Army Of Unalterable Law. Such manifestations, to my mind, reveal that, underneath the assumed garments of blamelessness, people are still pretty canny about themselves. They know we are not at rights, and it's a blessed relief to hear that there are people worse than we are, and by our crusading against them, we can draw some carrion comfort for our own unease, our own unholiness.

Caught Committing Adultery

In today's Gospel the purity squad isn't a lynch-mob. They're quite matter-of-fact about their mission to clean up the world's morals by stoning a woman to death. The law of Moses enjoins this punishment, though it is curiously one-sided, and seems to place the responsibility for preventing adultery unfairly on women. What is it that stops the officers of Mosaic retribution in their tracks? A meeting with Jesus, who is without sin. He, of all people, could visit the demands of holiness on all of us with perfect justice. But he doesn't. He calls them to acknowledge their sinfulness; and (beginning with the eldest) they disperse. What a moment of grace can come from the confession of sin! At last there is only the woman, and Jesus. Do you think he asks his question solemnly: *Woman, where are they?* Surely he must have been smiling after such a display of humanity! *Has no-one condemned you?* No surprise. I can't believe that the liberation in this scene is something we can live without. Let's rethink, this Lenten Sunday, and silence in ourselves the urge to punish. *Fr Philip*