

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

You're Always Right!

This cross comment is often levelled at those of us who have determined opinions; but it's not really about anything strong. It's a sharp diagnosis of a weakness: the inability to move once we've nailed our colours to the mast.

Sin Hasn't Been Abolished

The word "sin" has become politically incorrect, along with a great deal of other important words. When two eleven-year-olds took away a little boy and killed him by a railway line, someone interviewed the social worker hired to talk with them about what they'd done. "How do you talk to them about the *evil* which has so shocked the country?" The breathtaking answer: "*Evil* isn't one of our categories." I wonder what precisely took its place in the conversation. Was it something self-centred, like *out of character*? Or something aesthetic, like *unpleasant* or *ugly*? Or just a shade moral, like *unkind*? We seem to have lost the capacity to face that awful truth, that we are all capable of choosing to do things which have appalling consequences. The story of David - the great king whom God loved, the hero of every saga, the glittering winner of battles - is scarred by the terrible murder of his faithful, trusting friend Uriah: he's been fighting David's battles when David shamefully seduces his wife Bathsheba. Then, disaster: news of her pregnancy suddenly closes round David like a vice. He tries various subterfuges, dodges and covers, all to no avail; the infuriating faithfulness of Uriah frustrates every move he makes. At last he takes the only way open to him: with the kingly authority for which Uriah has such reverence, David engineers the death of a loyal soldier, and hopes that his first fault will be buried with the corpse of his victim. Enter the prophet Nathan, and the first reading of today's Mass.

A Burden Of Violence

The idea of a criminal *record* isn't something the police invented. With our living we are writing a story. We inherit a good deal of the setting, the other characters, the materials and the props. But we get to write our own script, to affect the plot, to design the stunts, to set the action. When we decide to include wrongdoing, there is no way to go back. This play has no rehearsals: we make our choices, and act (or stay in the wings); and we, along with the other actors, are compelled to accept the consequences. David had taken the way

of lust and of violence. Nathan tells him that God *for his part* pardons his sin. But the sin remains as a permanent mark on *David's* record, as surely as Uriah lies buried in a foreign field, Bathsheba is expecting David's child, and David's generals and adjutants are fully aware of what their beloved commander has done. This means that the whole story is known to everyone, because there are few secrets in a fighting unit. Nevertheless, the chief inheritor of the legacy of these evil deeds is their perpetrator. David now knows himself capable of the deepest dishonour. He will never recover his innocence. He will carry this self-inflicted wound to his death. That is what real sin is like.

Telling The Truth

There is no salvation in pretence. The first deed David can do to heal his life is the instant admission, simple and soldierly: *I have sinned against the Lord*. Pardon, as ever with God, is instantaneous. Sometimes it takes us years to repent - we are always in the right; but once repentance is sincere, God loses no time. Still, we are only at the stage of diagnosis. Treatment and recovery are still in the future, and it will be a heavy regime.

Hostel For Battered Lives

The Church isn't a health club surrounded by full-length mirrors, or a mutual admiration club for the morally beautiful people to meet each other in. It is more like a shelter for those whose repentance is sincere. One of the more dubious qualities in our way of life is the inability to turn ourselves round after we have failed. We'd rather clutch the evidence to ourselves, and carry on down the path we have chosen, darkened as it now is. We think there's no hope for healing, and - if we persist - we're right. The die is cast, and we can't unwrite the past. But when God created us, he knew what we would be like; every one of our deeds was known to him when he said *yes*, and we began our way to birth. His love for us includes every failure and dereliction we'll ever commit. And it will be in the community that believes this - that *knows* this - that we will find forgiveness and healing even in the people around us. We all have our contribution to make, building from our broken and beloved lives an inn for the forgiven, a hostel on the pilgrim way to the Father's house, where we shall find our robe, maybe even our fatted calf. *Fr Philip*