

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Not Far From You

There are times when we feel infinitely lost, immeasurably far from where we ought to be. I've met many people in this state. Sometimes their great relationship has broken up, or their life's work has collapsed, or they have been badly betrayed, or they have failed to get the big break on which they were depending. Sometimes they have lost their health and strength. Suddenly their hopes have imploded, and they no longer know where to go for purpose or meaning; they are simply lost people. What do you think they want from a priest at such a time, beyond simple friendship, and perhaps reassurance that all might yet be well?

### The Truth

Confidence to face the truth is essential to our happiness. When you've spent a long time constructing a plan for your future, giving names and faces to the rôles you would like others to play, and drawing up a credible account of your real life, it's a cruel, unnerving experience to be sent back to the drawing-board, to what feels like a blank sheet. To me it feels vital that we should be able to contradict that blankness, to recognise what we have learned a lot, that we are growing and developing on all fronts; and perhaps especially that no one possibility was ever going to embody the whole of what God wants for us. So although God lets us make plans, and sometimes to execute some of them, we needn't be unduly worried if every now and again some detail lets us down, or a big factor in the planning is suddenly wiped out, or even if the whole tottering edifice comes crashing down about our ears. There is no call to take to the lifeboats or go into a decline. We are not a finished creation, but a site under construction, with a large sign at each end: *Caution: God At Work.*

### Go Higher, Friend!

Here's a paradox: pride - making ourselves too much space - is dangerous and maybe even deadly sinful. But making more space for God is always holy and life-giving. By this you can tell that changing our course has always the possibility of grace: the greater the change, the greater the possibility. I'm very much talking with myself in mind, because I find it very hard to let go of what has become dear to me, and to trust the Maker of the universe to have something more to give me. And yet all the changes of my life, especially

the ones that sent me into convulsions, have brought real, unexpected fruitfulness. The old model of the Church as a Rock isn't as good as the new model, that of a Pilgrim People. Standing rocklike and still is not, of itself, virtuous. But moving forward on pilgrimage is. It's what Abraham did, and Moses. It's a paradox that the citizens of Jerusalem threw the prophet Jeremiah down a well when he told them they would soon be deported to Babylon. It was the worst news they ever heard, and they thought he was irreligious even to suggest such a thing. Yet the prophet Isaiah assured them, after it had happened, that God had actually decreed it. We are always invited to go higher in our faith, and to make ourselves humbler before the will of God. This is very good business practice, and it teaches us that God is better at planning than we are.

### God Is Close

What all this is coming to is the sense that God may be far closer to us than we think. In our lack of prayer, in our frantic wheeling and dealing to get everything the way we think best, we look away from God. We see a landscape of our own choices, and God isn't there, he is not in our picture. Not that we want him to be; we are far too busy for that. But when the weather changes for us, and the *No Entry* signs accumulate in our picture, and the future begins to look mean and sad, then there is a moment of grace. If we should turn away for a moment from our own failed plans, there is half a chance that we might find ourselves in the presence of the forgotten Father - not a distant memory from childhood, but the one who doesn't forsake us, the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. God has chosen to make us free of him, to give us enough space, should we so choose, to live in without giving him any attention. Any infringement on our liberty would have spoiled his whole purpose in making the world: we are to become divine, and to be his children, *if we choose.* To preserve that freedom, the Creator pays hugely. He watches Hitler try to destroy his Chosen People, he watches his Chosen People reject his messages - he looks down upon Calvary. But in all this he does not distance himself; he makes himself present where we work out the implications of our freedom. If we once turn from our fearful self-concern, we shall find him beside us. *Fr Philip*