

Why It Matters What You Believe

We employ clergy, amongst other things, to keep sniffing the religious air of our society. They're like the canaries miners used to take with them into the pits, to give warning of firedamp. The poor things used sometimes to drop dead in their little cages (as clergy do if their Bishops' prayers are answered). But at least they served a purpose in preventing people from dying of invisibly lethal forces; and that is what priests are about too.

Message From The St Hugh's Canary

I'd like to send you this week the message that *faith matters*. If you lose your faith, you will end up in medical care: because you will no longer see any need to get up in the morning, go to work, communicate with your fellow-human beings, or keep the rules of half-civilised life by which we're living. Now, if you put it like that, it seems self-evident that faith - our own personal understanding of what we're for and how we should be - is the most vital reality possible. But our society takes more care of dental flossing or the safe disposal of batteries than it does of faith. It's rapidly becoming a no-go area - not just between people, so that it's rude to ask what other people's belief is, but actually for each individual, to ask, *what do I believe in?* Because I'm committed to ignoring this principle, I often rudely ask people what they believe in, and I can report that in most cases *they don't know - they've never asked*. What they do when put on the spot is to mumble that *everybody's entitled to believe whatever they like*, which I find a dangerous principle, and then if pressed on what they like to believe, they come out with a tentative résumé of a few half-chewed bits of stuff about *Something There* or *Higher Powers* or *The Meaning Of Life* or *Doing No Harm*. If that's what we're getting up in the morning for, I'm not surprised that some of us are staying in bed, and I'm not surprised my property and I are not safe out at night.

Privatising Faith

We've decided that faith is a private matter. Of course it isn't! It's what inspires action: so it's a public concern. If my faith remains docile to the desires of my parents or the local authority, it's discounted. But suppose I become convinced that to hijack a plane and drive it into the World Trade Center is a holy duty for God. Is my faith still a private

matter? Suppose I decide that justice requires that I bump off traffic wardens one by one, or that I burn down hospitals for keeping us poor. It's easy to say: *he's gone mad*. That's a cop-out. All I've done is to turn private thoughts (which "don't matter") into action (which does). When the inhabitants on a housing-estate go out as vigilantes, and burn out a few locals they decide are a bad idea - one remembers the unfortunate lady whose brass plate made the awful confession that she was a practicing paediatrician - they are displaying the state of their faith. Frightening it is. When the country at large votes itself into a paranoid corner within Europe, which happens to be the place where the vast majority of our trade is done, and where all our closest neighbours are living, we think we're canny and hard-to-get rather than deranged. But we're certainly showing the state of our faith.

Help Thou My Unbelief

It is in the sanctuary of the heart that we must form our act of faith, and what we choose to put our faith in is the most vital question of our lifetime. *Put no trust in man*, says the Scripture: a little harsh, but wise if it prevents us placing our whole reliance for meaning and security on another person as weak and transient as we are ourselves. *Make yourself treasure in heaven*, says Jesus - reminding us that there are neither worms nor rust in the Kingdom. But these wise words are useless unless they bear fruit in our praying more, our voting for the Kingdom more, our building with real earthly bricks our part of the world to come. I ache with sorrow for the bereaved and the suffering, if they have nothing firm to trust, nothing but a few hopeful fragments of other people's religion. Increasingly I am celebrating funerals where no-one receives the Bread of Life, and no-one even knows how to make the Sign of the Cross, where no-one has heard of the water of baptism or responds to the simplest prayer. It isn't that they have apostatized. They've simply never had the faith, and when the tempest of life rises about their ears, they're dead in the water. Sometimes they've not even set foot in the place in the heart where faith must be born, fed, and exercised. If we, reader, have any faith, we must learn to share with these most poor brothers and sisters. *Fr Philip*