

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Give Me My Sword!

Britain is a land in geriatric decay. It feels as if we've run through our best ideas, and our great days are in the past. We have faint memories of Empire, peopled with stout and self-assured chaps like Horatio Nelson and Captain Cook; but we wouldn't know what to do with the world if it fell into our lap today (a thing which it shows little sign of doing). The national spirit seems to me to have become downcast, unsure, and fractious. In this anxious and fuddled culture, where nearly everything upsets us, and very little seems to interest us, beyond the securing of our own comfort at the least cost, the words of Ecclesiastes hit the note with precision. Eccles is the nearest thing in the Bible to irreligion. He reveals to us, in his depressed state, why it is so hard to get any group of Britons to stand up and sing a new song. He is, to put it frankly, a miserable old devil.

Excusing Eccles

Of course, we've got resources he didn't have. He was still trying to make sense of a world where this life is all you have to work with. Not many people realise that the Bible *wasn't* written by people who believed in an afterlife. The greater part of the Old Testament is the Bible of people whose only idea of "life after death" was the life of their children. The promise of personal survival was an idea that Jesus firmly held: but the high priests who sent him to die certainly didn't. Eccles has grown old; he's seen that the search for happiness and fulfilment in this earthly existence is doomed to disappointment; it all comes up against the long stop: "...and then you die." I agree with him. I don't think we can start to evaluate the Church's faith in the resurrection until we've taken aboard everything Eccles has to tell us about *vanity, and weaving of the wind*. So you're looking forward to the next holiday, the new baby, the new job, the new house, the rise, the better situation. Eccles has seen it all, and it didn't really last. *It'll all be the same in a hundred years*, he says, *and so what?*

The Resurrection

It's very important that we don't imagine the Resurrection as *prolonging* the life Eccles finds so profoundly disappointing. He doesn't much want even another day of it; don't give him a second helping! He needs a changed life, one which won't run to arthritis and

arteriosclerosis: an unlimited life, where there are no checks and balances, no compromises or cop-outs. Eccles wants something he can trust, and if he can't have that, he'd rather have nothing. (I think I'm warming to the old boy after all.)

Eccles, Meet Paul

If you compare the near-despair of Eccles with the Letter to the Colossians, they're like chalk and cheese (held to be different, but reflect: they're both packed with calcium). Notice that Paul too is talking about the inadequacy of earthly realities. But he speaks in the context of a lively awareness that there are *heavenly* realities that have come within our reach. He speaks of having gone over the brink that poor Eccles saw as his only future (*you have died*); but he speaks of something that truly is new (*now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God*). And then he says something that is very much alive: *That is why you must kill everything in you that belongs only to earthly life*. I wonder what Eccles would have made of that? His elegiac tones seem to be filled with nostalgia for what must die. Colossians is telling us to finish with all that old stuff, actually to get out the long knives and do away with what has got to die. *You have stripped off your old self, and your new self will now progress towards the truth as it is renewed in God's image*. Here is something new under the sun!

Moral Message

So there is a charter for hope - for rebirth. We mustn't restrict its scope or meaning. Why shouldn't Britain, why shouldn't Europe hear and welcome such good news? If our part of the world is running ragged, it is only because it is still trying to build a heaven out of earthly materials, somehow evading by sheer will-power the sentence of death which hangs over such a programme. It always happens: Egypt, Assyria, Rome, the British Empire, the USSR, perhaps America all lose their heart as the hollowness of earthly reality appears to them. Why have we all had to re-invent the wheel? *Pulling down our barns to build bigger ones*: we have been told the illusion it represents. Can we yet supply the missing piece to the human jigsaw, before we suffocate in the *débris* of our self-indulgence? How about us? Where do we keep our treasure?
Fr Philip