

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Xenophobia

It's said that a pessimist always sees the bottle as half-empty, where the optimist sees the bottle as half-full. They see the same thing, but their responses contradict. I like this sort of paradox, because I don't have great faith in our power to get at the truth by ourselves. We all have a brain, and even the least competent human brain is an instrument of awesome power. But it's not very safe when it's by itself. In physical terms my judgment depends on the power of my eyesight, hearing, nerve-endings, taste-buds and sense of smell. If they let me down, as they often do, my brain has only faulty info to work on. And this affects the residual self, the "me", who is formed and instructed by my five senses, poorly-equipped to make fair judgments about the truth. I need someone to stand beside me, and say: *Are you sure? I reckon you might be wrong.* Two pairs of eyes, four listening ears, two points of view: the experience is already doubled: the mind is twice as well-informed, perhaps the judgment will be so much better.

The Chosen Race

Israel is a very small country. Although we believe that God chose to draw close to them and to teach them about himself through a special providential history, they were always suffering from their particular shortness of sight or hearing and the rest. They became lost in the desire to preserve their privilege and their dignity. They annoyed and offended other peoples by their pretension and their confusing of religious destiny and earthly dominion. They assumed that God would want his chosen people to be the richest and strongest and most feared nation on earth. Again and again they were dispossessed, captured, demolished, robbed, and generally taken down several pegs. As usual, it was the prophets who caught at the truth: God *didn't* want this people of his to be proudly exclusive. Their knowledge was to bless all the world, they were to be benefactors to all nations, "a light to enlighten the Gentiles".

Open The Gates, For God Is With Us

This demanding piece of teaching should have encouraged the Israelites to open their doors to the world, so that the world could "stream to the blessings of the Lord". The only records of this happening come as a series of isolated wonders: the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon in all his glory:

Naaman the Leper finding healing in the waters of Jordan. Mostly Israel's story is filled with harsher lessons: Ten Plagues on Egypt, drowning Pharaoh's army, the finger writing on the wall of Belshazzar's feast. I fear that modern Israel sees its preservation in the same terms: and perhaps the pitch is definitively queered by the inextinguishable hatred which burns relentlessly between Jew and Arab at Jerusalem, the City of Peace.

Lincoln, City Of Peace

We display similar pessimism in our thinking today. The disgusting behaviour of a visiting football-team arriving at Lincoln Station last season bears all the hallmarks of small-minded hatred, the enjoyment of violent self-expression. These are people sharing their blindness rather than their sight, their prejudice rather than their right judgment. Their coming-together diminishes them, confirms them in their poverty. There was no-one there to say: *I reckon you might be wrong.* Multiply up to the European election: we authorised a man to represent us who is trading on people's fear of foreigners. His platform isn't based on the good things (the half-full bottle) for which we joined Europe, but on the long propaganda of war that has kept British armies on the march since the Field of the Cloth of Gold: the myth that all crooks begin at Calais, the idea that Germans eat children, that Italians are all assassins, that the whole continent is fed on muck, and that if you're not good Boney will come and get you. It wasn't so when the Normans came, and built us a Cathedral which is still the only building of national importance we've got, or when St Hugh came to be our Bishop from the south of France; it was only when nationalism reared its ugly head in 1509, and we started to think that no-one was good except ourselves, and God is an Englishman, that these awful attitudes gained respectability. Unsurprisingly, that was also the moment when we decided to divide "the Church of England" from the Catholic world. For heaven's sake, let not Catholics, of all people, join in this sturdy hatred of "foreign" things: things like decent wine and food, beautiful art and architecture, glorious music, and ways of life that form for many of us a brilliant cameo, for a fortnight a year, of what we'd like our life to be. Our humanity, and our faith in God, are bigger and better than that.

Fr Philip