

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## The Toppling Of The Temple

How general is this experience in our time! In the Gospel, because Jesus is standing in a very specific Temple, we are tempted to think only of the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, when *not a stone was left standing on a stone*, and the Romans punished the Jews for the fierceness of their resistance by crucifying vast numbers of the population (including all the priests) and dispersing the survivors over the face of the earth. But it's much more serious than that: everyone who identifies *any* Temple built by human hands as the eternal sacred space is doomed to see it topple, because God has decreed the fall of all idols, and all images that we set up to worship. All our families experience this fact, as their children desert the faith of their fathers, and find themselves strangers at their parents' funerals. The Temple has fallen for them and for us. Wisdom is the power to look on with confidence, when what we took to be worthy of our worship perishes: the ability to keep our confidence, because it is placed in God, who is above all false gods, all images, all earthly profit and loss.

### The Truth Is Almighty

Truth is indomitable, awesomely powerful; nothing we do can frustrate it or conceal it or oppose it in the end. The ticking of the clock alone will bring everything to light at last. Therefore every house built on lies trembles, and every comfort and security founded on lies cowers before the future. Despite this, people are suckers for fake security, so there is plenty on offer. We want to believe the lies, we want to agree with one another to believe them, if that will reinforce our hope that we are safe. The work of the prophets is simply to hold up a mirror, to let people see the fear that lurks beneath false things, to proclaim from the housetops the danger we secretly know lies behind the urbane façade of self-sufficiency we're all trying to sustain. Thus Malachi, today: *all the arrogant and the evil-doers will be like stubble before fire*.

### Backing The Wrong Horse

Righteousness in that day will be "the fear of God's name", that making of space in our life for God's greatness that is beyond us. If we try to organise our lives around what we know, leaving no room for the unknown, perhaps unknowable God, the world will call us sound and sensible. But we shall have

made a covenant with death, even if we gain the whole world by it. *To limit yourself to the unspiritual is death*, because human nature has nothing to look forward to except death. You will in this secular world find people openly opting for this faith in human nature as a sort of heroic religion. But a religion covenanted with death at last brings despair. We can't gather the human community around a grave that is waiting to devour us. So central is this truth, that when God wants to gather us, he gathers us round a grave that has been deserted, the Holy Sepulchre. It is right that the source of our fear should become the source of our hope.

### Change Of Use

Perhaps this explains to us the true meaning of the toppling Temple. The Holy Sepulchre is not just one more kind of Temple. It is still a real grave, but a contradicted grave - a *deserted* tomb. We go there, and gather there - every Christian Altar is a model of this abandoned grave - not because it's good to stand by a grave, but because, stupendously, it is the only grave *that no longer is a grave!* So Jesus gives us today a Temple that is no longer a Temple, and warns us that we shall be persecuted by a community that no longer includes us, and condemned by kings who no longer have power over us, and betrayed by families to which we no longer belong, and harried to a destruction which will no longer harm our lives. See how this matches the most disturbing passages of the Gospel: *Who are my mother and my brothers?* (a family that is no longer our family) *No-one who prefers father or mother, children or wife to me can be my disciple* (a way of life which cuts across our dearest relationships): *sell all, give to the poor, and follow me* (the surrender of treasure for poverty) *take up your Cross daily, and follow me* (renouncing the hourly impulse to profit). These things direct us to an alternative truth that comes into being only if we start to live it.

### Apocalypse

This evangelical thinking is called *Apocalypse*, meaning *uncovering*. We cancel out the worldly meanings we can see are perishing, and then recount what is left. No Temple, no reliable peace, no natural confidence, no worldly security: but a promise that outbids all hopes. *Fr Philip*