

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## King?

It's characteristic of our world that it has its use of words always under review. Should the word "obey" appear in the wedding service? Should the word "God" appear in the Constitution? We have words that are in and words that are out: "political correctness" has come to be powerful. In this context, I wonder what we make of the word "king". OK in a history lesson or a pack of cards; fine in that self-mocking tone where we have cotton kings or kings of the snooker table. But do we have anything left of the aura which was its true setting? Few words are so devalued as the word "royal", which is usually the key for a scandalous story in a squalid newspaper. It rather reminds me of the eighteenth century, which saw the removal of royal heads in Paris, and the total collapse of respect for royalty in London.

### The Book Of Kings

The Bible is full of kings, and they too get a characteristically poor press: occasionally from someone who thinks they're an awful idea, but more often because the reality hasn't lived up to the ideal. David is a pretty magnificent shot at a human being, and it's impossible to ignore the love which is in his Biblical portrait. But his son Solomon, despite his clear attempts to edit the record, is presented as a conniving, greedy man with a mania for his own grandeur; his portrait is marred by flattering notices about his wisdom and wealth, and the fact that his kingdom fell apart immediately after his death tells us all we need to know about the hatred he inspired in his people. Yet all the long and foul history of Israel's bad kings never extinguished David's light. When Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon slaughtered the last of the House of David, the people simply turned their hopes heavenward, for a David who would return from on high - a celestial Anointed One, who would accomplish a higher rôle even than David: the task of shepherding the People of God back to their own land, reconciled with God, and once more able to flourish as his Chosen People. This gilded figure appears in the Book of Daniel as *The Son of Man*, who is led into the presence of God and loaded with powers and dignities, and the destiny of royal authority. Such was the Messiah for whom the people came to hope. In one sense, because the reality of the situation was so bad, and the

future so bleak, only a heavenly vision would be enough for them. It would take divine power to answer their need. But it is possible that for many people this also meant a kind of quiet despair, like that of people who say, *we can only hope for a miracle*. It's a way of saying *there is no hope*.

### Word Becomes Flesh

This is where the life of Jesus erupts into the situation, with a quality people called *authority*. That, we may think, is the first requirement for a king. Jesus didn't need a title or a ceremony where this was conferred on him. He simply had it. He lived like a man who belonged in his own being; his life was something real and full, so that other people looked and felt only half-alive by comparison. From him flowed a strange conviction of power, so that the mad and the disabled suddenly felt life and truth flooding into them from his touch. People began to cast about for ways of thinking of him, ways of talking about him. Through the Gospel they ask, *Where do you come from? Who are you? Where do you live? Where does your authority come from, for the things you do?* These people felt his uniqueness, and were in awe of him. Some caved in totally, and wanted nothing except to be near him. They became his followers and, at length, his heralds to others. The path he followed, however, was one of dread. This awesomely powerful figure was convinced that his future was bloody and shameful death, a disastrous encounter with those who could not accept him, and who would throw at his sense of vocation everything they could. He was asking them for too much faith, and they needed to show him his human limitation. That was when they said, *If you are the king, save yourself and us as well*.

### Sign Of Contradiction

There is nothing in the old idea of kingship except archaeological thrills. But in this man who throws all his power away for crucifixion with a crown on his head, there is a fascination which twenty centuries haven't tarnished, a contradiction of all other models of kingship. He was quite serious when he promised the man who was dying beside him an entrance, by the end of that day, into a princely garden of paradisiacal bliss. Now there's a miracle.

*Fr Philip*