

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Put Out Into The Deep

This is a phrase from today's Gospel, a phrase adopted by Pope John Paul for his entry into the new millennium. We might take it as a way of starting to reflect on the new situation in our parish and the Diocese.

What's New?

I think we are entering a new phase in the Church's history in all departments. We need to grasp what's happening by looking with the eyes of an historian, assessing the final importance of this or that development. Comments that have impressed me concern the way in which the Christian Church, which has kept the soul of Europe for centuries, is now almost sidelined in the continent where it has been most at home - especially here; whereas in America, Africa, and Asia it is growing vastly in importance. This shift means that our astonishment over receiving a Polish, then a German Pope may be eclipsed, before long, by the arrival of an African or South American one; that we're likely soon to need evangelising by missionaries from other continents; that we may soon be hearing about Christ in ways we would never have imagined. If Victorian missionaries went to Africa with pictures of a pink, blonde Jesus from the Home Counties of England, maybe 21st-century Lincoln will be evangelised about a black Jesus by a preacher from Lesotho....just as inaccurate, I know, but certainly different.

Priests, Anyone?

I wonder if our alleged anxiety about our lack of priests is ever going to bear fruit in a realistic prayer for some of our boys to be priests. Priests don't come to the Diocese of Nottingham by train. They are brought up, in homes like yours, and they catch on to the idea of the priesthood by seeing the love their parents have for the Church and their respect for the priesthood. They soon discover this is little or nothing to do with the man himself, but is very much to do with his vocation and his office. You need to set a relatively small value on the rewards of a good career and a handsome personal income to become a priest, but if what you want is to *put out into the deep* it's a fantastic life. If you think that what makes life worth living is mattering to other people, having an intimate knowledge of many, and being allowed into their hearts,

I don't know any other rôle that would accomplish this better. To share the depths of the life of others, to be with them as they repent, rejoice, fall in love, search, agonise, learn, forgive, die, mourn, pray, suffer, and regain health is the most amazing privilege; and a priest does this, not with a few, in one place, but in many places and in many lives, with old, young, and middle-aged, across all boundaries of nationality, race, gender, economic status, educational level. You never know what the next 'phone call or doorbell will ask of you. I fully understand a lad who can't see beyond the expected pattern of a single important relationship, and the immense significance of marriage and family, for which he is prepared, after a fulfilling time in education and a discreet (or indiscreet) period of kicking his heels, to sign a mortgage and start buying a car and finding his place in the economic supermachine that will keep him busy until he's too tired to be busy any more. But meeting old friends of my own age who have followed that pattern, I'm quite sure I have a fuller and deeper life than many of them have had, or have now. I certainly wouldn't swap!

The Age Of Ministries

Our experience of the Diaconate has greatly enlarged our understanding of ministry; it's a rapidly-developing field of new experience. But what is really new is the understanding we're developing of lay ministry. As we move more and more into a *missionary* age - living as we do in a country whose ignorance of the basic shape of the Gospel is frightening - it is the growing importance of lay people, in the way they conduct their homes, in the way they carve out time and resources for their faith, in the way they love and serve the people they work with and for, in the way they become known as believers and as people who pray and live out the faith they profess. These things will turn the tide of agnostic distaste for religious faith, and the growing influence of superstition and anxiety, which flourish where faith ought to be, and which defile our national and personal lives. Priests must become ministers to a ministering community, as the Gospel comes out of the safe haven of the churches, and goes into the fields, where harvests must be grown.

Fr Philip