

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Break The Vicious Circle

One of the most unquestioned tenets of the common mind in our country is, I believe, a particularly naked relish for revenge. If you listen to those awful programmes where people bare their souls, the one kind of remark that always gets a big cheer is when someone calls loudly for draconian punishment of those who've injured or betrayed them, or even just disgusted them. I really think that I could raise a lynch-mob from any randomly-assembled bus queue, given a recent crime and an available culprit. People seem to glory in the sharpness of their righteous anger. It's as if there's a communal smouldering we all have inside us, only waiting for a good excuse to erupt.

Don't Get In The Way

If you have doubts about this crusading spirit of Nemesis, you'd be wise to keep quiet about it. Forgiveness is for wimps, and almost equates to immorality; "are you on their side or something? Why wouldn't any normal red-blooded human being want to string 'em up? If you have hesitation about how to respond to real evil, you must have something wrong with you. You'll make yourself an accessory after the fact." Well: but I hear a voice saying: *bless those that hate you, do good to those who persecute you: you must be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate.* Can you explain to God, that this is an exceptional case, where things like compassion aren't appropriate; this is *real* evil, you can't mess about with this? How readily we forget the wounds of Jesus, and his words in Luke's Passion: *Father, forgive them: they don't know what they are doing.*

Real Heroism

Yes, there is real evil around us, and really very evil people. How are we to deal with it and with them, in a way that doesn't turn us (however temporarily we may think it to be) into criminals even more terrible than the ones we claim to punish? It's because of the reality of evil that we need a holiness that is truly heroic, modelled on the holiness of Jesus. He said of his sacrificial death: *for your sake I consecrate myself, so that you also may be consecrated in truth.* For Jesus, the very reality of the evil made his total sacrifice necessary. He was showing us the need - if the vicious circle of hatred and revenge was ever to be broken - of people who surrender themselves to mop up the evil

and isolate it, to confine it, if you like, in their own suffering bodies, to prevent its infection from the chain-reaction that it would otherwise cause. You can't mop hatred up with kitchen-roll. It can only be absorbed by being sustained (as wounds are sustained) in a human frame. That is why the *crucifix* - the image of the dying Jesus - is more important to us than the empty Cross, or those completely inadequate statues of the risen Lord. If you try to walk round *telling* people to stop fighting and to forgive, you will be told to shut up, and if you insist, they will turn on you and shut you up, using the real violence and hatred that impels them. Then you will truly be mopping up their poison, using the sincere means of your own suffering. They will think they're killing you with their evil. But you will be dying for Christ's - and your - Gospel, for goodness.

Is That All Unreal?

O yes. Because we usually go down like skittles when our chance comes to suffer for our faith. *They don't deserve it, we say, the conditions aren't right, they'd only take advantage.* There are so many good reasons for reaching for our weapons and going to war with evil. *They only understand force, we say, and force is what we'll give 'em.* Well: and no doubt if you kill or capture villains in this way, you have done a bit of good, and you might be justified in the course you've taken. But you'll never change the world like that. You are simply reinforcing the way we've always lived: by efficiently using violence to get our way. Really to change the world, you'll need to find a different way to respond. This is what Jesus tells us in the Gospel today. We've been reading it out for nearly 2,000 years. Chesterton wrote: *People say Christianity has been tried, and found wanting. The truth is, it's never been wanted, so it's never been tried.* If we asked ourselves, just for this week, whether our righteous indignation is making us more or less like Jesus, we shall do some good for the world. If we ever get the chance to halt one of the cavalry-charges that are run around us all the time. We shall have done a great deal. We are all frustrated and horrified by the monstrous things that fill the press every day. It's an easy thing for us to vent our anger at them. Far harder to offer ourselves as a swab for the wounds of the world, and far holier.

Fr Philip