

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## ADVENT - A NEW BEGINNING

The going-back of clocks has brought darkness to our evenings, and the sun has passed far away to the South, leaving us cold, literally desolated. Beneath all the noise and turning-of-night-into-day of which we're guilty, the gathering quiet of winter is still calling us to slow down and reflect. Few of us will refuse. It used to be the time for firelight and peace, for what T S Eliot called "the evening under lamplight (The evening with the photograph album)". Surely the manic urge to celebrate for the sake of celebration, the endless round of pub parties, so-called "Christmas Dinners" all through December, with their badly-roasted potatoes and frozen puddings, must be due for a review. When we were basically malnourished for much of the year, there was a necessary comfort in a December of feasting. Now that most of us are overfed, there is something wrong with it.

### Where Is Joy To Be Found?

So ask yourself on this Advent Sunday: where shall we go, in this new year, to find joy? It's the greatest privilege to be empowered to give joy to another person. We've always broken the Christmas bank to see joy dawn on the face of a beloved child. A family celebration is designed to give us space to rejoice in our belonging to each other, to see one another's much-loved features, to be generous in the symbolism of gifts. There are still children, even here, who have little to rejoice in. But it often isn't a matter of money. The urge to spend more, learned in the past, may have to be unlearned. If we stray into excess, it will bring us little happiness. St Francis gave us the invitation to visit a real baby at Christmas, because he invented the crib. It's always healing to meet a baby. It's also instructive to see the way a baby opens a Christmas present, finds some horrid heavy expensive thing inside, throws it away and plays joyfully with the paper and the ribbons. It always reminds me: *Unless you change, and become like kittle children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

### Hooked On The Symbol

Let's remind ourselves that the giving of a gift is a *symbol* of love. It isn't a *substitute*, nor is it a *sacrament*, which makes the love present. A lavish present doesn't heal a mean or monosyllabic relationship, or bring back warmth into a cold heart. Perhaps we have

work to do in our relationships, before giving gifts becomes once more the natural, light-touch, humorous thing it should be.

### Peace In The Heart

If we could use December, quietly revisiting our memories, rethinking the way we relate to one another, remembering what it is that we treasure, there'd certainly be a rebirth of peace in our hearts. If we could stand back from the horrible marathon the Chamber of Commerce is hoping we will run, and spend some time thinking over each friend and relation, looking at them in God's presence, who knows how to teach us to love them, we would know what gift to give them more surely than in that raucous High-street struggle. In prayer God could show us others who deserve our love, and whose real need permits no confusion about what they would like, for they are starving and parching to death. For many of us, there will be more in our dustbins this Christmas than would suffice to save their lives; and our children will be compelled to throw away toys to make room for what will come their way. I asked a wise friend if he would like to be rich. He said: *However rich you are, you can only eat one dinner, and sleep in one bed.* Can we apply that to our desire to make merry and be kind this Christmas? The desire itself is good and right; the way we've taught ourselves to take is crude and worthless. And I've discovered that when you allow yourself little to eat or drink, it tastes quite extraordinarily good when you get it!

### Back To The Baby

I do believe in feasts, and I won't dare to pretend I won't be finding ways to celebrate Christmas. But no real joy can come to a heart that is set on foolish things. I think babies have got it right. They don't know about expensive or wasteful things. They take delight in sharing, and simple comforts, and the loving regard of their families. If we could change enough to share much more with many more people than we do, our lives would instantly mean more and have more joy in them. If we could acknowledge that we don't really need extravagant things to mark out Christmas, we might enjoy what we do have much more. All we need then, is to find enough hope and courage to make us into a real family.

*Fr Philip*