

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Everlasting Joy

In every important religious word there is a trap, down which we're used to falling helplessly! This is because our words won't express The Word: our minds can't contain the mind of God. If human minds are meant for knowing, then a human lifetime of learning is not enough to fill them. (There comes a point in your life when you realise that. I'd call it the onset of wisdom!)

I Can't Get No Satisfaction

The trouble is that once we get into learning mode, we can't get enough. We answer one question, and another one immediately comes to view. It's like a traveller who, just as he crests the horizon, finds a further horizon, and another hard journey, ahead. Sometimes we fall into the trap of swapping this ever-lengthening pilgrimage for some game that will symbolise it - such as making money, or acquiring titles, buying houses, or collecting sports-cars. You'd think that might make things more achievable, but it doesn't; we still *never have enough*.

Is Nothing Forever?

It seems that human beings become wedded to their own obsessions: always on the move, always needing to travel, to go further, faster, in different ways. We know we can't settle, that everything is in process; and anxiously we scan the signs of the times, watching to see if things are getting better, or worse. There is much in this attitude which fits our Christian faith. We aren't home, we aren't finished, we have further to go. The trap is to seek for the destination too soon, to make a deal with what we can see here and now. If we get trapped like that, our growing and perfecting comes to an early stop, and we find our boots setting in concrete. But must we really spend our whole lives waiting for a destination we never glimpse? Can't we catch sight of something eternal, here and now? The fascination of the mystical, the seeing of visions and the dreaming of dreams, never leaves us. Is there, in this workaday world, a tiny door through which we can receive news of another world?

Everlasting Joy

It is true that, from time to time, we can experience a sort of convulsion of happiness, which gives us, often suddenly, a radiant and authoritative impression of fulfilment. There

is peace with the world, peace with ourself, an immense sense of the beauty of the cosmos, its unity with itself and our unity with it. This is something deeper than the gratitude to another person who has been kind or loving towards us, deeper than any personal sense of purpose; it's an unqualified knowledge that the whole universe has a great, almost incredibly beautiful destiny in which we ourselves have been privileged to find a place. The onset of such feelings is entirely unpredictable. They're impossible to prolong, and impossible to engineer: if we could make them happen, there would be an industry to do it. Of its nature this experience is a gift, not an achievement. But I do think it is a vision of what eternal joy will be like.

Time To Resume The Ordinary

The truth is that such beatitude, if it endured long, would not help us to live the grimy and divided lives we have to cope with: lives which are crippled, leprous, possessed, blind, hungry and lonely. This is the world where the Transfiguration shone; but the journey of the One transfigured was laid across Calvary. So where is "everlasting" joy? Do we believe in it? Or must we conclude, from bitter experience, that what we think is joy actually becomes mediocre and despicable, another experience of disappointment, and of homelessness? That, I think, is a message I've seen written across a lot of foreheads, so that when I grasp the pulpit-rail and climb the steps to preach the Gospel, I am going to meet a number of grim countenances and beaten eyes. They are the eyes Moses met, when he first went to the Hebrew slaves.

Trust The Vision!

We are now in the last days of darkening, as we draw closer to the winter solstice. Beneath the multitudinous feet of the children of Adam, the earth is steadying, preparing to swing us back into the light. Characteristically, the Church looks forward to this momentary stillness, this hovering between death and life, and responds with an outburst of joyful faith: nuptial, royal, springtime faith in the power of God to make us exult in him. When we finally leave this world and its clocks behind, it will be by a threshold that now divides us from the everlasting joy in the heart of God. I look forward to its crossing. *Fr Philip*