

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Welcome The Prince Of Peace!

Sometimes the newspapers can't agree about which is the most important story, which is the front-page headline. Maybe the editors decide according to what pictures they've got to play with. A dramatic photograph can sometimes be the best thing to publish.

Good News!

Today we rejoice in the Good News which will always outshine all other stories; and although there isn't a photograph, I guess we've got the picture that says it all as well. How does "the image of the unseen God" sound? What the Incarnation does is to give God a human face. It does nothing for him as God, of course. But it does everything for us. We spend our whole life wondering what we're for and whether we've done the best thing with ourselves, and what we are worth at the end of the day. The whole human race is impaled on these or similar questions. Well, today the answer comes from the ultimate judge of the business. God *joins* the human family. To say that this alters our prospects is to put it a shade mildly.

Ambition

Our family history, as the human race, is mixed of shame and glory. Sometimes we've looked up, and the grace of the heavens has shone down, and we have been transfigured by a light more than earthly. At other times, we've lost hope of grace, and burrowed into the darkness, making a friend of the night, and have fallen short of plain humanity, doing deeds which haven't deserved the light. It seems to me that *relationship* is what's made the difference. When we've gone it alone, impelled by greed for power and self-determination, we've fallen headlong. When we've searched for a way of living in relationship with others, with the world itself, and with the One who governs the world, we have escaped from our limitations and entered the realm of marvel and delight. The letter to Titus speaks today of *giving up worldly ambition that does not lead to God*, commanding us to "have no ambition except to do good".

What Is The Peace Of God?

Genesis showed us God working, in Creation, and then resting. This is very allegorical language. But it does say that *God is at rest*. This restfulness belongs to God as his default

mode, his constant tenor of life. Eternity is restful, because possessing all things it has nothing to work for. Being all things, it has nothing to invent or replace. Loving all things, it has no fear or anxiety. Knowing all things, it has no nagging questions to answer. Can human beings experience such fulness of life? Only by hints and guesses. I think of moments where some superb piece of music has picked me up and carried me, so absorbed in its beauty and the wonder of the performance that I couldn't think of anything else. I think of the sort of loveliness that makes me catch my breath, and changes my mind about being alive. I can remember situations where I can only say that I felt beatitude, the privileged knowledge that God is with us and in us. These experiences remain in my store of memory, because they are the times when I made my mind up, when I learned my faith, hope, and love.

Living At Heaven's Gate

If you can imagine the limitless life which flows in such grace becoming your normal experience, then you might get a glimpse of eternity. For me such times are rare and extraordinarily precious. I believe we shall one day live in the full knowledge of grace, which now is obscured and confused by time and space. Sometimes I get so wintry and negative that I have to rely on the automatic pilot of habit to choose good rather than evil. I certainly don't live my life at heaven's gate. But I know people who are a lot closer to it than I am, people who mediate a sense of grace and peace that is mysterious and holy. I believe that Jesus did this in his earthly life. Industrious religious people aren't always very attractive; indeed, we can be the most off-putting of all people. Holy people, by contrast, *always* have something of this magnetism, which gathers people and moves them. Today we are led to that least decorated, least verbal, least humanly distinguished person, who is yet the most riveting of individuals: *the baby!* He is the picture of the day. We would want every baby to be lapped in the joy that "forgets pain, because a new person has been born into the world". This pure joy is, we find, short-lived for most babies. But it belongs to this baby, beyond all others: because of the truth that, in him, the world of pain will finally be engulfed in eternal joy. Fr Philip