

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Break Down Its Wall

This summer a very sorry thing happened on our road. The West End Methodist Church closed after many years of Christian life. It had reached the stage where the small group of members couldn't pay their dues to the central funds, and the Church could not meet its costs. The excellent people who met there have all dispersed to other churches. Doesn't it seem to matter to you? It does to me.

### A Church's Witness

That little building was a physical sign amongst all the houses and offices of the West End of something that was above the domestic limitations of homes and the mercenary concern of offices. It was a sign that people found Christ important enough to have his place in the urban texture of those streets. Maybe it will be demolished, and give place to more houses and offices: and another little sign of faith, hope and love will be eliminated: another door that was opened to welcome people to Christ will close.

### Isaiah And Jesus

In the Gospel today Jesus uses the words of the first Isaiah, warning his people that their status as God's Vineyard was under threat. The harvest had been sour grapes as long as anyone could remember; the people had lost their way. Isaiah knew that without being God's People, Israel could not survive. Jesus calls for the same people to entrust themselves to him, with exactly the same urgency. He reminds them that they have rejected and abused God's messengers with strange regularity. Now they will do the same to the last of the Prophets: *this is the heir. Let us kill him and take over his inheritance!*

### The Same Story

We truly do repeat our infidelities down the ages; if anything is constant about us, it has to be our regularity in evil. Ever since Eve and Adam, we have had our thieving hands on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: doing our best to steal equality with God. But in so doing we mistake our situation. The earth is still God's Vineyard, and we are his servants, whose rôle it is to produce fruit for him. But a pack of thieves will always be plotting theft, and so are we. We don't deserve to be God's tenants, and the Gospel

tells us that if this is so, we shall at last lose even what we steal.

### What About Us?

The closing of the Methodist church in our parish should bring a dousing of cold water to our own complacency. In our Diocese 34,000 Catholics are at Mass every Sunday; 100,000 Catholics are not. In other words, one Catholic in four manages to schlepp the body out to Church. To be consistent, this ought to mean there are about 500 baptisms in our Diocese every year. In fact there are nearly 1900; that means we are baptising 500 Catholics, and 1400 lapsed Catholics. 2,136 people made their first Communion last year. But only 784 were confirmed. And when it comes to marriages, there were only 429. The picture is very clear. We're baptising people who are already lapsed; many of them are coming through our primary schools as far as Holy Communion; after that a large proportion of them will sink out of sight until they die, when we once more find that we are doing 1800 funerals per year!

### How To Read The Scripture

I think the word of God is clear this week. Our Church in this country is at a crossroads. It has to take a good look at itself and read the signs. Are we happy to see our Church close like the West End Methodist? Are we happy that there should be no priest in it? (because it has never produced a Diocesan priest in all its long history). How many parents of boys in St Hugh's School, Our Lady's, or Sts Peter and Paul would rejoice to discover their son wanted to be a priest? Do you want to see the Liturgy celebrated powerfully and beautifully, or are you prepared to let it look after itself? Do you want to deepen your faith and take possession of it, so that you know how to pass it on to others? Do you think we should be a caring community, looking after one another and leading others to works of charity and concern? If you are worried that we are not what we should be, are you ready to make some sacrifices to change matters? Or will you see the walls broken down, the vines unpruned, the land undug? How is the fruit, says the Lord, that my vines should be making? Still sour grapes? *Fr Philip*