

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Back To The Beginning

Advent to me is the most beautiful, the most welcoming, the most consoling time of the Church's year, and every time I'm granted another Advent I have a feeling of privilege which moves me deeply. God has brought us back to the beginning, as a sign that he still has gifts for us, still has hopes for us. Let us welcome this holy season and New Year with attention and joy, ready to open our presents.

### Wonder In The Darkness

This week I shall be leading the candidates for the Diaconate and their wives in their pre-ordination retreat at Ampleforth, the great Benedictine Abbey in North Yorkshire. On the first morning we shall all be awake and ready to begin with Matins in the Abbey at 6 am. If the clouds stay away, the sky will be full of bright stars at that hour, and we shall cross to the Church with a great sense that God has new things to say to us. We shall listen to the quiet single voice that begins the first Office of each day, chanting the words: *O that today you would listen to his voice: "Harden not your hearts!"* These candidates have been contemplating their vocation for at least four years. Their wives will have been bearing great burdens to free them for their studies and to give them time to think and write and pray. Now we shall all be together, and husbands and wives will be thinking together full-time for five days. I hope they will find it a time of deepened awareness and renewed intimacy.

### The Abbey Church

We'll be holding our reflections in the house just north of the Church, on a rise in the ground. But six times a day we'll be walking together downhill, and taking our places in the monastic choir, where the monks will sing the Divine Office. Every time we go to the Church we shall hear words sung or spoken that will reflect, or moderate, or illuminate what we have been discussing, questioning, or meditating in our retreat. Our time in the Church will be more important than our talking and thinking in the house. It is like a heart-beat relating to the bloodstream; we

keep returning to the heart, being charged with oxygen, and then coming back to our work of thought and commitment, fed by what the Church says to God, and what God says to his Church. In this way the candidates will learn a new attentiveness to the liturgy in their own parishes, and return to the table of the Word and the Sacraments, to be fed for their ministry and their service of people.

### Advent

This season is the time when we open our hearts to the coming of God. This is not a simple thing to do. Is God a welcome guest, or a Master who comes to judge? Is he awaited peacefully, or apprehensively feared? For most of us, perhaps, God's coming must break through choked-up paths, hacked through our exhaustion, our despair, and our distracted lives. We've been doing too many things, and forgotten the One that is important. We've been wasted on trivia, and forgotten how to be at peace. We've become obsessed with practical things, and lost our sense of anticipation. Yet God is coming, expected or unexpected, welcome or not: the ticking of the clock still moves inexorably, and the meaning of the passage of time remains God's meaning. *He is coming.*

### Evening, Midnight, Cockcrow, Dawn

I love to be at Ampleforth. The Church lies like a great liner beneath us; every entrance into it is like setting sail on a new voyage; and the way that we find there is nothing gimmicky or novel. It is something ancient, and deep, and sounder than any one of us. It teaches us an obedience to Christ which Saint Benedict knew: a listening like that of a devoted pupil, or a loving child who is called to be an apprentice. I think it will be a good place for me to start Advent in: this time of winter rest and awaiting, of falling silent like the winter earth, of darkness and stars, candles and quiet. Before Vespers each night, we shall hear the thunder in the tower above us of the massive bell that tells the moors that we are all at prayer, that the Church is once more calling on God to come. *Fr Philip*