

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## ASH WEDNESDAY

The Christian religion is very deep, and we're often pitifully shallow. Pope John Paul II took as his theme for the Millennium the words of Jesus to Peter the Fisherman just before he called him as a disciple: *Put out into the deep!* I think this makes a marvellous point of departure for Lent, and if we take it seriously we can make our way courageously to the port, and embark for our journey.

### Getting Aboard

I don't think I am unique in feeling a sense of awe at the moment when I get on a ship or an airliner. These huge vehicles are usually sitting quietly and obediently where they ought to be; but the plane's recharging gear is already filling the air with vibration, and the turn-round crew are preparing to fire the engines. On setting foot on a ship, we may find it feels surprisingly solid; but suddenly we feel it heeling on the tiny swell that is always there in a busy port. At that moment I know I'm entrusting myself to conditions I don't know how to manage, to expert people like pilots and navigators and engineers, and I feel a sense of mingled anxiety and excitement. I am off my own ground, I am travelling. I also know that I'm at risk.

### A Strange Voyage

The archetypal language of Lent is that of the risky desert. This isn't a cheap day-trip with stewardesses or duty-free shops. It's a genuine journey - it leaves behind what's familiar and encounters new conditions: but spatially it's not like the travel we're used to. You could take this trip in a prison-cell or trapped underground; it requires a realisation of freedom that doesn't show itself in any wandering through space. The desert I must cross is already inside me: all that's unvisited and uncared-for, ailing and unkempt in my life. Lent knows that what God created in me has been cast aside and ignored, left for dead, self-condemned. Lent realises that I can't go on, carrying around a graveyard inside me, while I try to smile and look busy in a jangling and thundering world, all masks and lies, false jollity and pointless appointments.

So I prepare for an unusual, unexpected form of travel, which for all its strangeness, will have about it a deep consolation, a feeling of rightness, a sense of relief. At last, to face the truth and find peace: at last, to repossess my lost but true self, to begin the healing of a disease long ignored, and long suffered.

### Those Who Depart, Those Who Arrive

Eliot noted in one of his *Quartets* that those who are waved off on the sea-voyage or the railway journey never arrive at the other end. Their journey changes them. His poem evokes the departure of the *Titanic*, and the evidence of witnesses after the Tay Bridge Disaster: we saw the train go into the fog, and it never arrived at the far side. Both images recall the drowning that is the heart of Baptism, where we die to rise with Christ. Time always delivers change. We can deny it, pretend that everything is fixed, stays the same, stands still: but it isn't so. There is a death in every tick of the clock, and the world is moving on, and our life is implicated with this dying, this constant loss. To live truthfully we need to know this and accept it, and renew our act of faith at each moment. Don't think that yesterday's generosity can cover the needs of today, or that yesterday's courage will answer today's anxiety, or that the answers I thought were sound twenty years ago will free me from the questions and fears that threaten me now. I need to be freed from the past in order to live now. Lent is like being on that ship, where I find time suspended, and a moment of freedom from past or future. The blessed ashes come onto my head, and I accept that death which is already present. What will it carry away from me? How can I, will I change in this mysterious voyage that is within me?

### We Aren't Alone

Lent is a desert journey, but in company with others. Christ in the desert teaches us to undergo testing. The Church is with us, alert for God, seeking the depths of his truth, where hidden springs flow to renew our life.

Let us be sharers, all in need: and kind to each other, as we travel on one path.

## **BULLET IN THE BACK**

### **“What Must We Do?”**

Here are a few suggestions about Lent - not comprehensive, but they might lead on to further thoughts that will make Lent a creative and life-giving time for you and yours. Think big: this is life-and-death time, not a bit of tinkering with the icing-pump.

#### **Get Serious On Ash Wednesday**

It's good to get off to an impressive start, and not leave it till next Sunday to remember it's Lent. So cancel everything in its way: sharing the MASS ON ASH WEDNESDAY is surely vital. The ashes on our foreheads are a sign of life and death, our resolve to face mortality, the shortness of our life; we need courage to make use of this season of rebirth.

#### **No Go Larder Fridge**

Also remember that Ash Wednesday is one of the two mandatory days of FASTING AND ABSTINENCE FROM MEAT left in the Catholic calendar (the other is Good Friday). So let that be real as well: don't cheat; get really hungry, so that your body knows something special is beginning. We're not just brains, we're animals, and our bodies have life and death in them too. How many of our death-bound actions are lodged in the poor body, possessed by its longing for comfort, for guzzling, for acquisition? Time to restore command, and do justice in our bodily lives. We're not out to tame or dominate it: it has its own dignity and its own just fulfilment. And in the next six weeks it is going to enter into springtime, as the evenings lengthen and the buds pop and the earth looks up to the return of the sun. It's not selfish to salute the spring, to bring flowers into the house, something that is growing and alive. We should make time to get into the fresh air, and, if we can, to climb a hill or two, and look up into heaven.

#### **Making Peace At Home**

The place where we live should share Lent too. Our home is the place we make it; in

Lent there should be peace. Have we got the courage to switch the telly and the radio off, and seek for some actual quiet, or a contact with music that isn't just background noise? Is there a candle we can light, to make time to pray in the evening for ten minutes? Have we got a missal, or a bible that's in legible English, through which God can speak to us? Clearing a physical space, and keeping these things ready, may well make prayer possible.

#### **Make Peace With Others**

Life is much too short for wars and fights, and many of us have unresolved issues with people we ought to be close to. There are people who deserve more and better from us than we've given them. Now is the time for resolving our debts, and doing true justice. We're invited at mid-Lent to share the CaFOD Family Fast Day. Can we not do something extra positive to make friends with the poor on that day? We're all haunted by their pitiful images. Let's see if we can be less unworthy to look them in the face.

#### **Seeking Forgiveness**

Lent is a time for reconciliation. The Sacrament of Forgiveness is a coupling of our truthfulness, and God's faithfulness to us, no matter how we fail. We can make this really effective by asking forgiveness of others for our shortcomings, neglect, and offensiveness. Priests are not judgmental, and are exactly as weak and sinful as everyone else. Trust them to listen with sympathy, and perhaps even to give you real help and consolation. Don't be alone in this, of all areas. It cries out for the love of God. We must not fast from that! The Lord's Prayer reminds us that forgiveness is undeserveable; but we can't beg for it until we've truly offered it to others ourselves. So let there be an amnesty in this holy time.

#### **Get Ready For The Feast**

The most vital programme for Lent is to remember Easter, and to fix our gaze on the great three days - Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Night itself. Resolve now that you are going to take part in all three, and that you are going to bring someone with you who might not have come without you. Share Easter this year! What greater gift could you

offer anyone? What will God not give you,  
when you have done Lent justice? *Fr Philip*