

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Purifying The Temple

If you read Malachi, especially the bit which forms the very last chapter of the Old Testament, you will see that purifying the Temple is something which demands a power greater and higher than the best human beings can do or hope to do. *Suddenly*, he says, *the Lord you are awaiting will enter his Temple*. Then in the heart of Jerusalem there will be fire, and a fearsome caustic purging, designed to burn out from the holy place all that does not belong there, everything God has not commanded to be brought there.

The Holy Place?

What should we understand by *Temple* in this part of the Scripture? Not, surely, the massive structure on mount Zion, of which very few stones are left. But stay: the Temple, according to Scripture, was not determined by human beings. A great part of the commandments Moses receives in the desert is concerned with the ordering of the Tent of Meeting, whose design and form are governed by God. The Temple is the same: its dimensions are according to divine command, and the Tent is preserved in the heart of all that gold, bronze, and masonry: a human product surely, but obedient to heaven. In Lent we want to believe that the Holy Place to be purified is in the human heart of each of us; but remember that the human heart is not designed by us either. We aren't self-made, but creatures of God. He has the right to say what should be in our hearts, and what deserves to be extirpated from them, so that all is as it should be. Then what is to happen in the Holy Place so purified? *Sacrifice*, of course - *offered as it should be offered*. The purification of Lent is applied to us so that sacrifice may be offered in our hearts.

The Ten Words Of Sinai

This surely is why the Church reads to us today the Commandments God gives to Moses. They are holy texts, delivered from on high with peals of thunder, demands that the Creator lays on the people he has chosen. We aren't just created, wound up, and let go, like those absurd electric rabbits in the advert. By

these awesome commandments we are to share in our own making, always obedient to the original conception of God. Every day our deeds and thoughts establish in us what we choose to set there. If we give our days to industrious greed, we make a greedy life and a greedy human being. If to uncontrolled lust, we make God's work of art into pornography. If we spend our inner life on envy and spite, deception and denial, hatred and revenge, we choose that kind of humanity and bring it into being. Without God, we are nothing; what we choose to make ourselves always demands the upholding power of God, even if we make ourselves into monsters of depravity.

Stretch Forth Thy Hand To Heal Our Sore

But before the arrival of judgment, there is a final window of hope. The Lord enters his Temple, to cleanse and chasten all its defilements with merciful surgery. This is the reality we dramatise in community by our observance of Lent; but it happens in many different ways in different lives, observing no human or liturgical timescale. The Lord "suddenly enters" many lives, and the blast of his judgment roars through the devices and designs which disfigure us, and obscure his truth, and darken the light of God in which we were conceived. We think disaster has overtaken us, as we lose powers we had used for no good, and have torn from us possessions we had robbed and misused, and find our self-centred plans in ruins. How could we so easily have assumed that the power of salvation would respect our loose covers and flower-borders? The Holy Place is a burning bush on a desert hillside, a sinking ship on a stormy sea, a mountain where the people dare not open their eyes: a man hanging on a lonely cross. Of the sacred Temple, the hand of God himself makes a desecration, *tearing its veil from top to bottom*. What we need in Lent is the greatness of vision, which will let us recognise the divine hand when it touches us. His surgery is not according to our cosmetic choice, but to his transcendent intentions. Let it happen, let it begin with me.

Fr Philip