

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Come Out Into The Light!

My mother suffered from cancer for a very long time - 35 years. For much of the middle of that time she experienced remission, but the wretched thing was always there, waiting in the wings, as it were. It reappeared after about 15 years, and for the last 20 years of her life we were in that circuit of hospital visits, drug régimes, visits to the photographer and the radiographer, and occasional radiotherapy which fellow-sufferers will well recognise. We children learned a lot about sharing confidence, and communicating hope, and sometimes lifting the whole burden as far as we could. There were grinding hours in waiting-rooms, looking at people far iller and less cheerful than we managed to be. But there was also a very good doctor, who knew how to keep the home fires burning. Near the end of her life, this good man came to say goodbye to her, knowing that his long years of helping her were now at an end. It was very sad, and very clear what was happening, and I revere the man for insisting on doing it.

### “There’s No More We Can Do”

Those hard words appear in today’s first reading: *there was no further remedy*. These words having been spoken, the reading goes on dispassionately to describe the taking-apart of the state of Israel and its royal dignity, its religion, and its Temple. Nothing is said of the horror, the tears, the deaths and losses which devastated the Holy Land. All of this is covered by a kindly metaphor: that God was commanding that the Land should lie fallow, as it says, “a seventy-year Sabbath-rest”. This euphemism would not have deceived any Jew. The Exile was a revisiting of Egypt, a definitive going into evil. The psalms and poetry written during the Exile stain the Bible with their dark colours, and the prophets even forsake their words of doom, knowing that the worst has already happened.

### Where Did You Receive These Wounds?

Human beings bruise as easily as fruit. But the effects of great suffering are not always to ruin and spoil the sufferer. Our journey into

darkness, our passing through evil can season us like salt, and bring out the flavour our life was meant to have. Grief teaches us the value of joy, and gives us a standard by which to discern happiness, a scale of judgment. In terms of religion, Jesus speaks to us of laying down our life, and St Paul speaks of our being *baptised into His death*. Looking back to the Exile, we can see that God withdrew from its crucible of suffering a refined remnant of all the loss and destruction, of which he could begin to form a new people. They would never be the fresh-faced innocents, Adam and Eve, with which Genesis began our story. They would have the narrowed eyes and wary senses of wounded people, of whom it is said: *the scorched child fears the flame*.

### We Were Dead Through Our Sins

To have an acquaintance with the grave is no evil inheritance, if we are to be people whose path of life lies through it. Lent began with ashes, to remind us of our true knowledge of death. At that moment, all we knew of death changed its station in our life. Instead of being a collection of dim suspicions, of nameless fears, of guilty secrets and unspeakable truths, our knowledge of death became clear to us as the indispensable condition for wisdom, for progress, for realism, for engagement with the future. It can now speak its proper name, and be built into our thinking. It can be a kind of fulcrum, a turning-point, a place of conversion and hope. As long as you live with death hidden in your cellar, so to speak, and no-one is allowed to advert to its presence, you are haunted and compromised by it. We no longer have to live like that. We acknowledge our sinfulness openly, because we know it does not disqualify us from God’s love. We acknowledge our destiny to pass through the grave with courage, because we know it is the gateway to resurrection with Christ. We greet sickness and deterioration with humility, knowing they have no power to pronounce a final judgment on us; only God has that power. We take no refuge in darkness, but

claim ourselves as children of the Light, of  
the eternal joy of God.

*Fr Philip*