

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## “Are You A Racist, Auntie?”

I overheard the little child from next door ask my potato-scraping mother if she'd be interviewed for the school project on racism, and this simple question was fired at her in the number one position. She didn't hesitate for one moment. *Yes, she said, and I don't know anybody who isn't, whatever they say.* Cor! (Ma did have the power to take my breath away sometimes.) She went on to explain that people would deny their racism, and work against it (to a degree), but that in the end and deep down, we have a distance we place between ourselves and people of differing language, race, and religion which makes us capable of horrible meanness, fear, and cruelty from time to time.

### Racial Justice

Today is Racial Justice Sunday, and a time to take a fresh look at this very powerful subject. It goes without saying that we have a very strong take on racism: we've seen the horrors of racial hatred exalted into almost religious terms (by the Nazis) and gentrified into political theory (by South African *apartheid*). We should need no lessons about the capacity of racism to damage and disqualify its victims, or to turn its perpetrators into monsters. To meditate, even for a moment, on the children herded into the trains to Auschwitz, or to think of the bitter poverty of the townships in wealthy Capetown, should be enough to confirm in us the lessons of history. Martin Luther King and Anne Frank, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu have given us more than those things, however: they have warmed our shame into positive feeling for the goodness and beauty of trampled humanity. These lightbearers point us towards the face of our beloved Saviour, hanged on a Roman cross as *King of the Jews*; we know that there is no room for racism in a faith that believes in the Fatherhood of God.

### Racial Love

So we can go further than justice, and think about love. Love is the most nutritious and powerful of all blessings, cost what it might. The real tragedy of racism is that it cuts us off from the possibility of love, which has to *grow* if it's to be itself. Love that stays the same size is fake. It's stagnating, like one of those promising hyacinths that suddenly loses heart and withers amid yellowing

leaves, until, instead of charming the path to Christmas with its sensational perfume, it starts to pong like a goat and has to be ejected. Love crosses boundaries, like Romeo and Juliet's; it leaps fences, bursts chains, opens doors and unties human power. It keeps doing that until it makes humanity divine, makes human beings look more and more like God. Let's not be fooled by selfish possessiveness or greed, jealousy or fear. You can mix those unholy qualities into a passable imitation of love or patriotism, but it will always reveal its fakery at last. Racism is a dead give-away. Racists can fly the flag, talk about love, pride, and passion. Let's call hatred by its proper name, whatever flag it wraps itself in.

### A Retired Missionary

I've always been impressed by old men and women who have worked in Africa. They come home, often in damaged health, and they're found a place in various caring situations; some priests can work a while in a parish, some nuns in a convent or doing appeals. We pass them in the street without realising that in their minds they are dreaming of the distant jungles and veldts that still bask in the African sun. They are listening to the voices of cheerful villagers gathering to be nursed or taught, and they are remembering how much the Africans taught *them* about love and mercy and justice and fidelity. They're always polite in their British setting. But they aren't really with us. They're back in the place where they lost their hearts to people they'd been sent to help. That love is so immense in its meaning, so true and strong, that it seems to me like a pearl of great price that would be worth the gift of a life to have. When you talk to them, they often ask shyly, *Have you been to Africa?* and it's always with a great regret and sense of poverty that I have to say *no, never*. It's like a bereaved person who says, *Did you meet my wife?* - hoping to find someone who could share the memory. Missionaries teach us so much about the glory that comes when love is allowed to grow great. Racism is the stunting of our growth to glory. It does untold damage to the people it hurts and imprisons. But in the end it makes those who are motivated by it deaf, dumb, and blind; they are disabled and deformed; they are the ones it damages the most. *Fr Philip*