

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

O, I Do Like To Be Beside The Sea-side!

True enough; and was a time I liked to lie on the sand and bask in the healing rays of the sun; and then I grew to be less of an asset to the viewing public, and at the same time I learned I was shortening my life by sun-bathing. I'm very sorry, because I don't think those lotions mix well with towels and sand. I think I learned something really religious by contemplating the sun in this way. The *silence* of sun-bathing was the first clue. People are quite absorbed and quite ready to fall silent. Yet this rarely results in actual sleep. The *transcendence* of it is another clue: how can we so easily *warm ourselves* in front of a fire that is 93 million miles away? Knowing the greatness of this tremendous conflagration just grows with meditation. No wonder ancient peoples used to worship the sun. Under God it's the source of our being and staying alive: it's dangerous, and it relates directly to all the powers of the natural world.

Fire And Water

There's a great difference between sunbathing in a garden and the seaside experience. On the shore you are accompanied by that other great elemental presence, the ocean. Like us, it's aware of the heavens: the moon is pulling it into mysterious waves and tides, which often dramatically display the authority of the unseen. The sea too is capable of inducing silence and awe in those who contemplate it. I don't remember land-gulls when I was young (perhaps we didn't throw enough away to make it worth their while in those poorer days): so the skirl of a gull still evokes the seashore to me. But even the busy clattering, shrieking industry of the birds doesn't break the deep sense that on the seashore we are in a uniquely powerful and mystical place.

Down To The Sea In Ships

Those who venture out onto the waters form a special community: *these men have seen the Lord's deeds, the wonders he does in the deep*. The words of the Psalmist show us that it's always been so: and there is plenty to bear

out the tradition in our culture today. As dwellers in islands, we know our need for seamanship, and those who acquire skill in sailing tell us that *the fear of the sea is the beginning of wisdom*. Respect its rules, learn its way of communicating, and you might be safe. Nevertheless, a ship always needs its watchmen, even in the depths of night. The fate of the *Titanic* dominates our imagination, and the loss of warships, right through to the Falklands War, haunts us still. One of my earliest memories was of the wreck of the South Goodwin lightship, and many of us will remember the *Herald Of Free Enterprise* as it lay on its side in the Channel.

Happiness And Horror

Perhaps it is this blend of meanings that so invests the imagery of the sea with emotional power for us. It is certainly necessary for our understanding when we find water in the liturgy: a baptised baby is not dribbled-on by Aitch-Two-Oh from the town main, but passes through the terror of the Red Sea crossing, and joins Jonah as he is swallowed by the great monster, and hears the voice of Jesus to Peter, saying *Come to me across the waters*. This is the imagery of life and death; and we never feel closer to that awesome margin than when we stand on the edge of a cliff, and contemplate the surging of the sea in all its tumult and power. One of the frequent titles for God in the Bible is "the One who rules over the seas"; so the question of today's awestruck disciples in the boat, *Who can this be?* is almost self-answering.

The Awesome Is Close

We live our lives as peacefully as we can: we value tranquillity very highly. I believe this has much to do with the way the whole world is available to us at the touch of a switch. We know that the world is filled with famines, earthquakes, fire and flood, before ever we come to consider the crimes of the human race. Many of us are deeply afraid of this shocking knowledge, and some of us fear our daily exposure to it. Wisdom lies in constant prayer for two virtues: the first, of awe in

God's presence, and the second, of faith in
his power over the sea. *Fr*
Philip