

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

There Must Be Another Way

In the desert the people “murmured” against Moses. He had brought them by too hard a way; there should have been an easier option. We were never made for this desert testing, this dread voyage with thirst and starvation three paces behind us all the time. It’s too risky. It demands too much trust. We don’t like the look of it. It can’t be right.

How Long Does It Take?

“One night to take the boy out of slavery. Forty years to take slavery out of the boy.” We ignore the full import of slavery. It is traffic in human life: it’s turning human beings into property, to be used at their owner’s whim. There are full slaves in the world today, whose lives have been physically abducted and whose freedom has been formally brought to an end. They have no independent life of their own, but exist as an extension of the body of their owner, whose ultimate aim is to annihilate them as human beings, maybe even to blot out their lives. Now, you don’t have to suffer that total form of abuse to have slavery in your experience; most of us have a ring in our nose by which we can be mindlessly led, if only someone else finds the way to catch us. We will, if you like, have our price; and if most of us mistake our slavery for our independence, that’s the cleverest enslavement of all. The adverts, for instance, soften us up, and make us ready to be taken in the shops. The work ethic takes our strength and time, and harnesses us; we readily swallow the idea that our interests are the interests of our multinational employer, which will cheerfully throw us to the wolves when we become less profitable than someone who’s cheaper to exploit. We surrender to the blandishments of governments, who offer us a tiny illusion of freedom and democracy, when in fact we are all in hock to money and power. Let’s not pretend that slavery has been abolished. The wilderness is still there to be crossed: and the Scriptures do not go out of date.

Elijah’s Desert

The prophet knows he’s in the wilderness because he has severed his links with the evil régime of Ahab and Jezebel: because he has taken his stand against falsehood and hatred: because his brothers have been slaughtered, and he feels his fidelity is itself shown to be a sham. He lies down and prays for death. And

he too has to be roused by the angelic hand, and fed for a new journey of faith. God brings him to the Mountain of the Law, where the covenant had been made with Moses. There he will be renewed and recharged with his mission, to fight for the truth and to depose all that is false. Elijah accepts the impossible trek, and comes to the high place where God will speak to him.

“They Will All Be Taught By God.”

This is Jesus’ second quotation from Scripture, in the sermon about bread that he is teaching the multitude he had fed. No-one has ever found it in the Bible we have; but there is plenty in the Bible that is like it. The teaching of God is the central reality, the true bread that gives eternal life. Jesus is that true food, and we must seek him and live by him, until like Elijah we know who it is we belong to. Then, says Jesus, we shall sense that God is drawing us to his Son, that we are finding our true way to life in the One he has sent us. If Moses’ followers grumbled and wept, we who come with Christ will not be different: the way he leads us is even more totally demanding than the road through the desert: the Way of the Cross is what he will teach us. This is where the teaching of Jesus parts company with “what we want to hear”; because humanly speaking even Jesus could hardly bear to hear it. But he accepted “draining the cup” of his death because it perfectly expressed his divine self-gift to the Father. If you can accept that reading of his total vocation to belong, if you can understand the Cross as a way to be Son of God, then you’re a Christian. If you can’t go so far beyond your humanity, if you’re stuck with the impossibility and agony of the Passion, then you remain a spectator who does not understand. Your life as an unbeliever will end in death just the same. As a believer you will go to that death with Christ, and find hope in it.

“My Flesh For The Life Of The World”

Most scholars believe this language really belongs, not here in Jesus’ general teaching, but in the close intimacy of the Last Supper, when his death was approaching. Still, in the sensational claim that he has come down from heaven, and that God demands all humanity should believe in him, Jesus is already courting his Crucifixion. *Fr Philip*