

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

I Hold My Life In My Hands

There are places I've stood in where I had to pinch myself to believe what I was looking at: perched on a cornice of cliff, three hundred feet above an inlet of the Mediterranean island of Ischia, with the blessed sun turning the blue to gold...standing on the Piazzetta in Venice, watching the evening light glorify the basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore on its perfect island...seeing thunderflashes in a nearby cloud thirty thousand feet above Paris...I could go on for hours. Usually there's someone nearby who is taking no notice: a waiter appears with a bag of rubbish to put into a bin, and returns whence he came: a poor air hostess passes, bored out of her skull; a woman with an anxious face scurries by with her mind on other things. How, one wonders, can they be so blind?

Got The T-Shirt

Sadly, most of us take so much for granted that we're often only ten per cent alive. But there are moments where we are poignantly and patently alive: in danger, in fear, in anxiety, especially for others. Then we can have the experience of holding our whole life in our hands. We know that we'll never forget this moment, it is so significant. Maybe it's an ordinary few seconds, a few minutes, a stretch of hours like any other. But for this period it seems that everything else is of lesser meaning; we are at a crisis. Few of us design or choose such a moment: typically it falls upon us, apparently by accident. I find the story in today's first reading very moving: a widow and her son, preparing to share their last tiny meal, knowing that they will then starve. I once saw some footage of an African woman in a famine, pitifully thin, holding her baby who was on the very edge of death. The poor woman was plaiting the little child's hair with total attentiveness. She could not feed her, but she could make her hair beautiful before she died. I expect they are both dead, indeed: yet in my mind she's doing that forever, and whenever I remember her I'm ready to weep.

Too Much Reality

We can't bear reality for long, we have safety devices that cut in, insulation, buffers to absorb the impact of truth and make it bearable. But there's a price: what insulates us from sorrow or horror dulls the capacity for joy just as surely. So our lives pass under

anaesthesia, and we miss the extremes which make it real and valid, trading them for the half-life that we feel able to cope with. This is where our faith can come to our rescue: because praying is about holding your whole life in your hands and standing in the presence of God. Real prayer can't leave anything behind. Nothing is excluded from the gaze of God, and the experience is one of being looked at whole: it's a complete encounter, precisely because God sees us whole. And we can experience our life as a whole thing, because of the total knowledge which God has of all its nooks and crannies, all its voids and chasms: God searches us more deeply than we can search ourselves. Why should we wait for moments of crisis in order to see our lives like this? Praying quietly can be the place where we gather together the straying sheep of our relationships, put in order the jangled gifts we've half used, and heal the wounds of the hurtful day. Very often we will find God bringing to our attention something we haven't truly seen, or something whose full meaning we have let slip; there are times when prayer is the re-integration of a life that has started to fall apart.

The Poor Widow At The Treasury

Poverty is something that afflicts all of us in one sense or another. You can be rich in money and yet starving for love or for the Holy Spirit; how poor we are in spiritual terms, in our rich country today! Jesus is watching the Temple Treasury. Its form is known to us: there are a number of huge brazen trumpets, a bit like the horns on top of old gramophones. Into these openings, pilgrims hurl their offerings as they enter; one can imagine the satisfying clatter as the money descends to the chest beneath. Enter our poor widow. She gives two half pennies: she could have kept one for herself without blame; but she designs to make a true sacrifice. You see, her poverty makes possible a sort of generosity which for the rich is not possible: she holds her livelihood in those two small coins. No-one counting the proceeds for that day noticed what she gave; it's a small drop in a great ocean. But because of the way she lives, it is a greater gift than the rich can give, in their well-supplied plenty. So our poverty multiplies our value, and makes our love the greater. *Fr Philip*