

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Creative Change

Repent is a bleak-sounding word, because (from the unrepentant side of the picture) it suggests a surrender of cherished plans, a reversing of direction, an acknowledgment of time wasted and wrong ends of the stick grasped. In other words, it represents humiliation. Being brought down to earth isn't a dignified experience to go through, and we resist repentance as an option.

...At Our Peril!

Ogden Nash wrote lyrically of his new car in advert lingo: *My natal day I will not curse; I've three speeds forward, and one reverse. The backward speed I truly adore; but love the forward three times more.* Most cars are supplied with reverse gears, and it would be perilous to decide to do without one. True, it can be awkward and delicate to back out of a cul-de-sac. But we all go down one sooner or later, and the grace to realise, and extricate ourselves, is what repentance implies. Once this positive change has been accepted, the quicker and easier the better. What's really dangerous is the refusal to change, the way we become paralysed at the thought of having made lots of mistakes, having done many things wrong, having lost so many chances to do good. All of that doesn't matter now; the past can't be re-written; but we can change the present, and make it a good diving-board for the future. Reverse is sometimes good!

Jonah And Nineveh

The book of Jonah is a great fable, and like all the best children's stories it deserves to be read carefully by adults. Jonah's task is to call the mighty city of Nineveh to repentance. To achieve this he proclaims the doom of the city in forty days' time. The King proclaims a fast and the city raises up its prayer for pity with one voice; and God does not inflict on them what Jonah had threatened. This is a very clever story, because it turns on the supposition that *God* has changed his mind; whereas what has happened is that the people of Nineveh have changed theirs. Given that human sin always actually leads to loss of life, you can say that, by repenting, people

can be said to be saving their lives; and so it is for the Ninevites, and for us. If we want to live on, we must be prepared to step backwards, turn on a sixpence, and throw all our resources into retracing our steps, into taking a new option, and finding a fresh path.

Good New Year Stuff

Last week we read that very sophisticated account of John's Gospel, where disciples of the Baptist become disciples of Jesus, the Lamb of God. This week, Mark gives us discipleship quite differently, as an open-and-shut business: Jesus says "Follow me!" and at once (one of Mark's favourite phrases) they drop everything and follow him. It's as if an unseen guillotine has swooped down on their previous story, and now they are on a new tack with a new Master. Perhaps fishermen might understand the experience more easily than car drivers; they relate to the wind, not to a highway code; and the wind has a mind of its own, where car drivers think they are in total command of the vehicle. Jesus himself likened the Spirit of God to a suddenly-changed wind, "blowing where it will". Now we can see how freely they welcomed his call, how ready they were to change. I'm reminded of the great value Jesus had for children, who are not yet fixed in concrete, but supple and flexible. That is how we must be, to enter the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom Is Near

People are very ready these days to think of their Catholic faith as one option among many. They know that there are many wisdoms and paths on earth, and that each has something precious and good to offer. But we mistake our religion if we think of it as a mere matter of taste. Catholic faith is a way of responding to a call about which we do not have a choice: God's call to humanity, which Christ came to bring us. Catholicism is so called because it carries that call to the *whole* Universe, not just to a select portion of it. We'll only be good Catholics when people no longer think of us as anything but subjects of the Kingdom of God.

Fr Philip