

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Coarsened, Trapped, Dying Of Fear

Jesus applies these calamitous words to the human family in the last days - that is, the days which lead up to the judgment of God. Let us have a good look at ourselves as the new year of grace begins today, and see how they fit us: because Paul says, *Brothers and sisters, these are the last days.*

Coarsened?

We like to think of ourselves eliminating what's gross and ugly from our lives. We look down on the sort of savages who used to begin at Calais, and now probably begin at Naples or Trieste or the east end of Austria; we shudder at the mention of the Middle East, all camels and bombs and no proper drains. We are quietly proud of our NHS and bank balance, and permit ourselves the modest pleasures which our prudence and thrift have secured for us. H'mmm. Is all this much more than wishful thinking and complacency? We have edited the world of so much reality; we no longer see what happens to it, because we are so good at making ourselves comfortable. Actually, we are making ourselves *coarse*. We have to be hardened against the cries of the poor, the unjustly-treated, those denied respect and a proper share in human community. Those difficult sensitivities have to be blunted if we are to relax in our situation. That we can enjoy the exquisite taste of an expensive Sauternes or the superb skill of an arcane musician in an exclusive concert won't make up for the deafness and blindness we've accepted, which have sealed the doors into our hearts.

Trapped?

The money traps us, holes us up into a machinery which won't let us stop. British people work longer hours than anywhere in Europe, and have the fewest feasts and holidays. We are trapped in our minds, seeing no alternative to the rat-race we're in. This slavery seeps into our resting and our community-building; we're all exhausted emotionally, and loth to get involved with one another when we ought to be free. There is less and less community, and therefore less and less shared joy. Everyone has to paddle his or her own canoe, and if you happen to be alone and friendless, it's probably because you're unlovable and not a good person. When did the ground bass underpinning our

life get to be a negative one, whispering to us all about the pointlessness of human life, the worthlessness of others, the depressive tone which engulfs us? Why is addiction so rampant, why is the Royle family prone in front of the television, insensate and crass? Is it because we live free lives in a free country, and this is what the joyous rest of a free people looks like? I don't believe it is!

Dying Of Fear?

In that there is fear in the depths of the human heart when it is lonely and isolated, ungiven and unreceived, I feel sure that beneath the sad spectacle described above fear is at work. When you knock on a door nowadays, people habitually answer through the letter-box; those little spy-holes and door-chains tell their own story, and the shrouded appearance of a suburban street at night seems to say, "We're safe for the night, and the drawbridge is up." But there are more people living alone in these fortresses than ever before, and they aren't all the self-sufficient householders they seem to be. I do believe what Auden wrote, *We must either love, or die.* I think everyone knows that in their own depths, and if they aren't consciously loving, they will be to that extent in fear of death. Jesus Christ is the victor over death, and he is the one who can speak to this condition. My fear is that no-one who is excluded from the good things of our life is safe; and the ones who are not safe are dying in our streets. They die of violence, of cold, of neglect. In the last year on Monks road they have died of fire and of road traffic and of alcohol. But behind all of this they have been dying of other people's fear, which has denied them the possibility of warmth and safety, the possibility of a family or a home.

Advent

Advent is the time when we turn our eyes resolutely forwards, and gauge the future with no blindfolds. We do this because Jesus Christ enables us to do it; he alone gives us the promise that the worst we can suffer may be our path to life. He enables us to bless one another with consolation and hope, when these things are wavering and guttering in us. In the feast of Christmas he will assure us that the fate of our whole human family is in his hands, because he has become one with us, and we can no longer be lost. *Fr Philip*