

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Take Off Your Black

Advent is wonderful: as the darkest days of the year close around us, the liturgy begins to crow with delight at the thought of the winter solstice - the moment when the earth rethinks, and starts to tilt back towards the sun. It's only eleven days away, and then the moment will come for us to hang out flags.

### The End Of Mourning

We begin to mourn at the end of an earthly life, and onlookers may draw the conclusion *it all ends in tears*. But the solstice reminds us that the gathering darkness has an end to it, and that the Lord will bring us back to life and light. The placing of Jesus' official birthday at this very time is exactly right; it gives us a way of celebrating that's all about birth. The coming of a baby is so elemental a cause of hope and joy, it speaks to us without any need for explanation: a baby brings a smile to our face and lifts our heart, and reminds us in the simplest way of the effortless power of God to bring life and renewal. Specifically, he brings an end to mourning, that dutiful entrance into grief which is our debt to love. Those who refused to mourn would not visit the depths of humanity. But those who refuse to rise again would be equally inhuman: God has not created us for death.

### Way, Truth, Life

So the Christian way is more than the Way of the Cross, large as that may loom for us from time to time. The Truth is glorious, filled with love and joy; the Life that we live must never let go of the hope for joy; and the Way too must have about it that expectant direction which looks for signs of the fulness that is coming. We don't know our destination, can't see how it will come about: but Jesus says *You know the Way: I am the Way*. And in today's Gospel, with its stately prologue, Luke (our evangelist in this new year of grace) calls us to *prepare a way for the Lord*. We should make sure it is the triumphal way that he deserves, and not a miserable dark passage that takes its tone from grief.

### A Straight Way

The Christian mystery has about it a grandeur which sets out a new kind of justice for us to observe. We are not dragged from a morass, dripping with mud, coughing and retching. We rise *like servants waiting for*

*their Master to appear, ready to welcome him as soon as he comes; and our meeting with him is joyous, because he says to us well done, good and faithful servant: enter into the joy of your Lord!* So it is right for us to look out our wedding-garments, and to prepare to experience the healing happiness that comes after a night of affliction. *Take off the robes of sorrow and distress.*

### Christian Celebration

But if we want to rejoice in this time of the year, we must be sure that we do it *wrapped in the cloak of the integrity of God*. The "spendfest" of the shops won't do it for us, and really we should be back-peddalling on all that; not because we're mean, but because it's not hitting the mark, not reaching the place where the miracle happens. You can only eat one dinner, and the pleasure of a good dinner isn't enhanced by trying to eat two, nor by throwing away three others we didn't have room for. Let the baby teach us, again, with his simple delight in the wrapping-paper or the box, instead of the present; you can make a baby chuckle with pure delight for nothing; can't we become like little children again, and let God's Christmas present set our tone?

### Something Old, Something New....

What a present does for us is to give us something new. Why can we not welcome a new person into our home this Christmas? This would open up a greater possibility for happiness than many expensive gifts. Maybe we could return to the gifts of the past, and do that most demanding thing: shut up, sit down, and be quiet for Christmas: turn off the electric, light a candle, read a line of the Advent Scripture, and give God ten minutes to himself, listening and waiting for him. The little liturgy of lighting a candle is pure Advent; the turning off of the lights a sign that we're stopping to rest; the Scripture, a sign that we're waiting for God. Do you think for one moment that he will not respond?

### Every Valley Will Be Exalted...

...every mountain be laid low; winding ways will be straightened, the rough road made smooth, and all mankind shall see the salvation of God. Let no grief prevent us from welcoming him. Let no false joy divert us from knowing him. May we live in wisdom, and love the things of heaven! *Fr Philip*