

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Disturbance And Manure

You're quietly doing what you like to think is your best, and suddenly your roots are being forked up and messed with, and then whoosh! -buckets of muck falling on you from all angles, and the atmosphere well and truly disgusting....ah, me! Isn't that what happens when our lives were beginning to seem tolerable? The worst.

Is It Really Bad News?

Lent is the time when -at least in the form of ashes -we all start in a bad way. From the beginning Lent talks basic, and the scene is disturbing to our complacency and torpor. Instead of feeling tolerable and calm, Lent says, our lives should feel half-dead and becalmed. We're in love with death, not life; we'll trade hope for stability, even when stability is the silence and immobility of the grave. And this isn't just a religious voice or a churchy message: it's a message coming over from the earth and the season, as Spring wrenches all creatures out of torpor into the time of rebirth. Eliot wrote, *April is the cruellest month, mixing Memory and desire...* yes! The memory of desire, perhaps desire no longer cherished, no longer hoped for. The spring summons us back to hope, to vision, to reawakened life. The awakening experience sometimes involves some medicine as well. There's nothing nostalgic here, like the autumnal remembrance of things past, of people passed. This is the knowledge of resurgence, the arrival of the future, the somewhat unlooked-for work to initiate fresh harvests, a new summer. I know the awakening is rude, and the sunk state of our lives has a firm hold on us. Thus the firm feel of the divine fork at our very roots, and the deluge of fertiliser to make good any poverty in our soil.

The Challenge Of The Present

Christianity is very keen on present reality: it's true that we have a big line on the future, but we also have a powerful, characteristic relationship with now, with this very time. The only place we can really meet God is now; not "sometime in the future", not as a memory of something which happened in the mists of time, but here and now. If we can't meet the eternal God now, we exclude this time of ours from God, and we lose our hold on what it really means. The real meaning of this day is that it is a Day of the Lord, in anno

Domini, a year of the Lord. We take on our true light, as beings made in God's image, when our lives are lit with the glance of the Lord, in our prayer or in the life of grace we're meant to live. We see the hopes and anxieties of our time properly, when we position them in the overarching plan of God, who will defend what he has made in us and bring it safely to fulfilment.

The Surprise In The Parable

Many of the parables have a similar kind of cast-list: we easily accept the stagecraft, where there is a father and his sons, or a king and his banquet, or a farmer and his field: and we very easily come to replace these patriarchal figures very simply with "God". If you read the parable of the unfruitful tree today, you find something new. Who speaks in the accents of the true God in this story? Not the owner of the orchard, who decides that the unfruitful tree has failed to give its harvest, and forfeited its place in the ground. If God thought such thoughts about us, we should not be undergoing this time of rebirth now. Instead, the voice of God today is the voice of the employee, the gardener; *let me give it another chance, let me do what will bring it back to life!* And let no-one dare to suggest that the voice of doom is the voice of the Father, whilst the voice of hope is that of the Son. There are no two minds within the Trinity about the salvation of the human family. I think the owner's voice is the voice of the world: full of cost-counting "realism", which turns out to be negative and destructive, and full of condemnation for the weak. The gardener, by contrast, is patient with the patience of God, and hopeful with the generosity of God, who causes his rain to fall on honest and dishonest alike.

Thinking With God

Our job in Lent is to wrench our minds out of the mean grasp of the "realistic" world, and to let it bloom with the realism of the Kingdom of God, who has planted the seeds, buried the yeast, and decreed the flourishing of his creation. *If it tarry, wait for it -for it will surely come!* If we feel that might seem unlikely, we need to stretch our desires a great deal wider, and make room for our story to coincide with the history of grace. That's the reality we were created to enjoy. Now is the day of salvation.
Fr Philip