

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Our Faces Transfigured

Have you ever known someone take on a really terrible challenge, and rise miraculously to confront it and endure it and manage it? They may be helping someone else to endure a frightful illness, or bearing some unjust accusation or lawsuit; they may have taken on a crushing job that no-one else will accept, or going through a course of medicine which challenges their very life. We may weigh up their chances, and shake our heads; and yet they come triumphantly through the dark, keeping the faith, saving the treasure, holding together their own sanity and that of others. Such experiences change your life: it's as if you've looked over the edge of "normal" experience, and it's hard to return to "normality" after that. The people who were exiled from Jerusalem had this sort of experience. Everyone knew that it was the end of them; all the other nations treated like that had disappeared into the soup of the Assyrian empire, with their culture and their religion, never to be seen again. But everyone was wrong. They stuck it out for eighty years, and they survived.

### The Return To Jerusalem

When they came back, it wasn't the same people, and it wasn't the same city. The Temple, the Palace, the city walls lay in ruins, and nobody could summon up the energy to suggest they should or could be rebuilt. The people were wounded at the heart, cold, and lacking in initiative. Not unlike the survivors of the two world wars in Europe, they had in some sense won, just by surviving. But there is no joy, no fulfilment: a victory without these qualities is no victory at all. Who would say what needed to be said, and lift the heads and hearts of this shell-shocked nation? The answer is in our first reading today. What poetry there is in Isaiah, as in his sixtieth chapter he speaks to the broken people of Jerusalem! He evokes the one image that expresses the reversal of the exile: *Lift up your eyes and look....your sons from far away, your daughters being tenderly carried....* Imagine the grieving mothers of "the Disappeared" in South America, if after all their grief and hopelessness they could turn, and see their beloved children coming towards them. So Isaiah speaks to Jerusalem, trying to help the city experience what was happening as a moment of rebirth, of pure joy, the answer to three generations of

prayer. The prophet calls on the people to let themselves be healed, to hope again, to rise to the moment of grace. In this way the people are to be transfigured by the happiness they thought was lost for ever: as the Psalmist says, *he renews the joy of my youth, he restores my strength like an eagle's.*

### The Renewing Of Our Lives

Our country has lost a tremendous amount in recent years. Its common life has faltered, its grip on its heritage has weakened, the future seems full of confusion and threat. People no longer know in whom or in what they trust; they have become orphans in the world, their relationships are sliding apart. People fear that might is right, that they are at the mercy of impassive forces of wealth and domination which have the power to enslave and to possess any or all of us. The feeling of being trashed leads to the growth of contempt, as old and young alike are bullied and robbed and abused. Wisdom seems to have deserted us; officialdom blindly wrecks peoples lives and wastes their substance on one pointless scheme after another. If we decide that we no longer need the Shepherd, we can't be surprised to see the dereliction of the flock, especially the small and weak. We need desperately to find our bearings, and to be gathered together, and to find a new dawn for our common life.

### They Opened Their Treasure

Our torrent of Christmas presents is not copied all over the world; in many cultures it is Epiphany that is the time of gifts. We would like to see our parish as a place where each person's gifts are valued and shared. There are many people who find their lives fulfilled by these ways of belonging to the Church. If you would like to offer something new to the rebuilding of community, now is a good time. We made a few little sheets of paper with some suggestions for different ways you might help; there are many more. There is a box at the crib to receive any offer you might like to make: all the things we ask are ways of serving - ways of being the family of God. If you find your way to making an offer, you may find yourself coming like the Wise Men, and finding that most hopeful, lovable sight at the end of your journey: a newborn baby: our hope and joy. *Fr Philip*