

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Give Up All You Possess

It's too easy for us to understand *possessions* to mean merely physical objects: the contents of the china cabinet, the balance at the bank. I think it's clear that Jesus wants something more than that, and he spells it out in the awesome words: *if anyone comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters - yes, and his own life too - he cannot be my disciple!*

Being A Loser

Our lives always include small experiences of loss. We try to pretend they're flies in the ointment. Often they're more serious, and reduce us to anxiety, fear, desperation. We're not equipped to accept the fact that our lives are transient, and that there is no way we can halt or slow the progress; the ticking of the clock, I have always felt, is the most sinister of sounds, and a short meditation on its meaning can rob us of much self-possession. It seems clear to me that happiness depends squarely on learning to lose happily; and the school of doing this is the school of love, where we learn to pour out our lives generously, without watching them go.

Parent-Watching

One of the mysteries is the way many hard-pressed mums go about their exhausting tasks without counting the cost. See her in the supermarket aisle, patiently comparing prices and choosing what all the people at home will eat, while some indescribable miracle of creation lies sleeping on the trolley. If the baby's asleep, it's quite likely he was wide awake causing mayhem at 3 am, and no-one will give mum back those pointless hours of lost sleep. Parenthood is so utterly absorbing of everything mums and dads have to give; the miracle is that they give it without much thought. This makes it possible for them to forget the awesome cost they pay for their children, and to become holy in so many ways. *Their left hand doesn't know what their right's doing*: but God who sees all that is done in secret will be their reward, even if they aren't expecting that either. (Looking in from the outside, I sometimes get the urge to tell them to think of themselves a little more, to let themselves off the hook; but they just smile, knowing that nothing is so important to them as their children. As if I wouldn't understand that!) But isn't it extraordinary, the power

possessed by these small bundles of babyhood to generate such selflessness?

However...

Still, there is a sort of possessing here too, which must die the death, like all the others: not to rob our lives of their meaning, but to clear the decks for the arrival of the true gift for which we were created, which will utterly transcend the greatest human inspiration or joy; not that we come to understand that, until our hearts have been possessed to their earthly limits. To love, *and lose*, is actually a holier thing than to remain all our lives in any kind of human fulfilment. The breaking of the heart described by Jesus in the Gospel is a dark experience of mercy, and is to be understood as the surrender of more of our possessing. This I have observed very clearly in the courageous mourning of widows and widowers: so selfless a form of fidelity, so private, so concealed in its depths from anyone else (*of course, they would never understand!*). But in that quietly crushing grief the Holy Spirit is at work, preparing the faithful for the moment when their eyes will be gladdened by the vision of God.

Omelettes And Eggs

We get so involved in our devices and desires that the purposes of God are often beyond our knowledge. My busy mum in the throes of mothering a baby is learning God's love in one mode; a grieving widow is learning it in another; and both experiences can work well *without ever being named* for what they truly are. God's providence doesn't depend on some wordy bloke like me sticking labels on it. The heart is broken open, like an egg for an omelette; the yeast is buried in the heart of the flour, the seed is sown and will produce its harvest. We may choose words of one kind or another, at various moments of our life: the Psalms are full of exultation, and they're also full of bitterness. Our faith includes both of them. But the divine purpose in what happens to us is seldom easily read. I'm sure we won't see it for what it is until the full blaze of the divine life is poured into us. Let the fearful words of today's Gospel help us not to impose our meanings on what happens, and to trust the Father to bring us to our full stature: to the wonderful freedom and glory of the children of God.
Fr Philip