

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Rich Man In His Castle

People sometimes complain when old hymns are “corrected” in new Hymn-books. One of the corrections no-one seems to complain of is the one in *All Things Bright And Beautiful* which reads: “The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate: (God) made them, high or lowly, And ordered their estate”. It’s an Edwardian idea that everyone keeps his place, because God ordained it for him. But it was blown to smithereens by the shells of the First World War, when people began to believe that the order of the world might not have been quite so divine in its origins.

Amazing Innocence

It amazes me that anyone could write such a verse without irony, knowing that the Gospel itself contains a story like the one we read today in St Luke, where a rich man who feasts magnificently is destined for hell, while the poor man at his gate is destined for heaven. And the startling thing is this: never does the Gospel say that the rich man was a bad man. Nor does it ever say that Lazarus was a good man. And when they die - that’s the moment of judgment - the rich one goes down *because he was rich*; and the poor man goes up, *because he was poor*. The rich man was taking consolation in his riches; and because he put his trust in them to keep him happy and comfortable, he loses everything by dying; there are no pockets in a shroud. So because Lazarus had no confidence in the things of the world, which had treated him so badly, he was gathered into the arms of Abraham: one of the poor, to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Rich And Young

We have the story of the rich young man who came to ask Jesus how he could enter into life. Jesus read him the commandments; but he said, *I have kept all these since my youth*. So Jesus told him to give up his possessions, and have treasure in heaven; but he couldn’t do it, because he was very rich. This is such a sad story, because *Jesus looked on him, and loved him*: Jesus had seen his soul, and found it to be beautiful and generous. But he still couldn’t look beyond the good things of the world he had inherited, to find the kind of goodness Jesus wanted for him. It seems to me that the good thing about being young is precisely the possibility of freedom. Young people aren’t as mean as old ones, because

they feel they are perhaps going to live forever. This makes some young people capable of amazing generosity - the sort you only discover the depths of later in life; but our young man is also rich. And wealth can fix you in a vice-like grip, and strangle in you the generosity which is the ultimate form of beauty: self-giving, in all its freedom, is the height of human loveliness. Those who haven’t realised that are the poorest of people, however rich and blessed they may at first appear.

The Great Gulf

So what is the “great gulf” that prevents the rich man and the poor man from meeting in the afterlife? Well, I don’t think we need to search far. It is, of course, the big wall with the locked gate that the rich man rejoiced in during his wealthy life. If you take a trip to East London, and have a look at the smart houses which have been built in place of the old slums Alf Garnett lived in, you will find that it is a land full of “gated communities”: there are electronic gates, opened at the touch of a button as the big limos approach from the City. The “communities” are those of the very rich; and outside these electrified barriers and locked gates, the poor are still surging with their problems and their fixed misfortune: a great gulf indeed, never so great as it is today. *By the measure that you judge, you will be judged*: the Gospel could not be clearer. The symbolic walls and gates of the houses of the rich are only hinting at the barriers which divide the world; we know that if we found a starving child at our door we would make his needs our own. Because he’s safely in Darfur or somewhere, we’re safe from him. But beware of safety, beware of rich man’s walls! Which of us, in the end, is the prisoner? In the end, which of us will be saved? The Gospel is quite clear.

Not An Atlas Of Eternity

Some have tried to use the story of Lazarus and the rich man as a guide for the afterlife. I think they miss the point. If we just keep it in our pockets as a map for the time after judgment, we may be very unfortunate. It’s much more important to use the Gospel as a guide for this world, for now. If reading it makes you start drilling a tiny hole in the wall of your gated house, it might be the saving of you for all eternity.

Fr Philip