

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

We Are Merely Servants

This week's Gospel is a brilliant piece of illumination for us in our Christian life. This is because we are strangely prone to losing sight of the really good news of our faith, replacing it with some false cause for joy drawn from our own very bad ideas about happiness and about what fulfils us as human beings. You can take it as axiomatic that when our ideas differ from what we read in the Gospel, we are in the grip of something which is going to prevent our happiness...and we must pray to be delivered from it!

How Hard It Is To Grow Up

St Augustine wrote in his life-story, which he called *Confessions*, about the way he detected the illness of sin even in his earliest memories. Watching babies, he saw the same mystery; and if you look carefully, I think you can see something similar. Babies are wonderful at telling their needs; but it is not long before they learn how to exploit their apparently primitive language, putting it at the service of greed and self-importance (does this sound pessimistic? Well, take another look at a baby!) They learn how to glad-eye their elders, smiling for chocolate and cuddles, at a shockingly early age: I've been quite scandalised at the way babies come onto you from their prams and cribs; and if this doesn't bring the desired response, they shamelessly turn to faking grief and despair, weeping piteously; and at last they fall into rage, seeing what a display of anger will bring. In this they are not really relating to their elders; they have learned a language that seems to work, and they are good actors and use their skills disturbingly well.

Knowing Better Than Mum And Dad

In a slightly older child, this can become very sophisticated indeed: he knows his parents love him, and will do anything they can to make him happy; and this dangerous knowledge can be very easily exploited when he wants to get round them for some desirable end. This isn't a mature relationship with parents, but an exploitative one, in which the child is using his parents' adult susceptibility for his own childish purposes. Wise parents refuse to be used in this way, and sometimes they will say *No* for no other reason than to reassert their own superior knowledge of what is best, their own authority over the child. Parents still have

much to teach a teenager, even when his or her hormones are most bossy and domineering. Parents must remain a little longer in the driving-seat!

We Will Never Know Better Than God

Our civilisation is obsessed with the individual's authority over what happens to him. We have seen this personal authority arriving earlier and earlier in people's lives; what was said of twenty-one year olds is now said of eighteen-year-olds; people are consulted earlier and earlier about their individual desires. Perhaps few of them are actually ready for such autonomy. But the trend is clearly established for all. We have less and less time for any kind of authority to rule over us; our default idea of humanity is that of the individual, not the member of a family or a community, whose life is meshed in ties of loyalty and in covenants. Unfortunately this model tends to rob us of the capacity to relate to God, because God is always the Creator, and we are always creatures. Because this is represented as a choice (*Would you like to be a creature, or just yourself?*) we are wrong-footed. You can choose to live *as if* you were not a creature of God, but that doesn't stop you being one; it robs you of any maturity: if the one fact that makes sense of your being is ruled out as a possibility from the start, you stand little or no chance of gaining self-understanding.

How Is This Good News?

It is a delight to know that we are already loved for what we are, and that we don't have to become worthwhile before we can have value. That's what being a creature tells us: that God chose us to be, and wanted us. If he asks things of us, we do not have to explain them or justify them; they are his will, and we are servants of his will. It is he who will make up the accounts, and find for us the way to share his joy. This is extremely good news! The lonely artistry of the human being who lives for himself is not always a positive experience; we do not always find it possible to love ourselves, to like ourselves, even to approve of ourselves. In God's scheme of things this is something we learn through our relationship with him. We learn we are loveable by being loved; what we do or achieve matters little by comparison with that astounding experience. *Fr Philip*