

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Exalting Oneself

Don't we all believe in things like "bettering ourselves" and our power to "make something of ourselves"? Isn't it said to us from an early age that if we get our act together we can become something or somebody important? Teachers and all sorts of trainers are paid to get this notion into the heads of young people, and we call a school good if it sends many young people away to the top ten universities (preferably those gilded cages, Oxford and Cambridge), and can point to former pupils who became cabinet ministers and the like. It's one way of understanding education, and it seems to have the public mind in its grip.

How God Did It

If you watch the way in which God entered the human world, you find things done so differently that you might take fright at what you've become, what you've accepted, as the right path for a human being. Jesus comes into a part of the world which is dull and backward. He is born to people whose significance is extremely limited, people who would not have troubled any historian. He lived an extremely limited life, whose travelling was confined to the small area where he was brought up, with perhaps a few journeys to the capital city, on one of which he comes to disastrous grief and is eliminated from the human story by common consent, at quite an early age. The only two things that terrified him were death, and being exalted by those he'd impressed. He fled from the latter, and after considerable struggle, he freely accepted the former. So you might say that thing that most appalled him was the day when they tried to make him their king.

Exalting And Being Exalted

To be raised up, to be honoured, is something we prize. *The Queen's Birthday Honours* are said to hold the attention of quite hard-bitten power-mongers, and we have heard how much some of them will pay for the hope of a K or a barony. *These things*, you may say, *do not matter to me*. But they mattered enough to Jesus of Nazareth that he ran up and hid in the hills rather than appear to accept earthly honour. And when he stands before Pilate and says *Yes, I am a king* it won't be in Pilate's sense. A kingship based on respect for truth carries no threat to Pilate or to his Roman master, who is as good with lies as

with truths. *My kingdom is not of this world*; and Pilate is totally of this world. He can think of nothing more important than the Empire and its dominion over others.

Lifted On High

The exaltation Jesus accepts is the crucifixion, and he accepts all its agony and its withdrawal of all that humanity could offer, so that the one thing, the pearl of great price, the true treasure of his heart can appear as the only value for him: to be glorified by his Father, to be exalted to his Father's right hand. If Jesus had had a glorious career of earthly acceptance and human honours, and died of old age loaded with the praise of his peers, we should have a very different religion. We would be able to accept the religion of human prosperity, as it is practiced in the United States; we should be able to believe that God only wants us to be rich and successful, so that the world may say how prosperous a thing it is to worship the right God. Instead, we find that the only kingdom Jesus promises is the one inherited by the poor, broken, unacceptable people he gathered to himself, who are already halfway to inheriting it because their life is miserable! How could this Church survive? How could you go into the world that is so hungry for power and the felicity of wealth, and say: *follow this man, and you will carry the cross of shame with him, and you will be nailed and lifted up to die in agony!* It takes a pretty special kind of person to be able to hear what this "good news" says, amid a people whose life is invested in active and industrious greed. But that is the Christian gospel.

The Courtesy Of The Kingdom

The beauty of Christ's humility is what steals into the hardened heart of the world, and makes possible that turning-round which we call conversion. The idea that waiting to be honoured by God is a lifelong programme of education, that we will find our true selves and our true happiness by obedient waiting for the love of God, is strange at first; but it offers something that is not perishable or fickle, like the world's transient honours. It can come to be so beautiful a prospect that all other things can be gladly sacrificed for it. We are created to lose even what is dearest to us. God offers us something greater; and that gift will not pass away. *Fr Philip*