

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Fall And Rise

Now we are near the end of the year for the Church, and we rightly turn our minds to the end-things: disaster, toppling temples, religion in the dust, faith tested to its limits, the fire that burns up the life we've known and finishes it. When we say that God is the Creator, we include these experiences; when we say that he is our God, we say that he gives even these things their meaning. It would be a poor sort of religion that made sense of plenty and happiness and flourishing without telling us how to deal with their opposites: the words of Isaiah's God ring in our ears: *I am God unrivalled: there is none but me; I create the light and the darkness; death and life are in my hand.*

### Words That No-one Can Contradict

In the world, none of us can evade the ultimate contradiction of our own death. We shall all try to live, and death will say *no*, and we shall submit at last, every one of us. The only way to cope with this knowledge is to see the hand of God in the reign of death too: *I create the darkness.* It's hard. Jesus himself chose words of desolation as his death approached; our flesh cries out with him, *Why have you deserted us?* - and I am deeply grateful that he chose that psalm as his last prayer. He was even then reaching out to all of us who have to feel desolation, sense the truth of that darkness; and when we do, he has made himself our brother. Next Sunday we shall see how close he has come to us, as he speaks with such immense love and power to the criminal crucified beside him.

### Never Forget Pharaoh

When the book of Deuteronomy laid down spiritual rules for Israel, the greatest of them was that the Israelites should remember the deed of God which freed them from Pharaoh and his slavemasters. It was necessary for them to know slavery, before they could acquire the taste for freedom. Times change, models for understanding are broken and remade. But truths are sometimes much deeper than fashions for expressing them. The pattern for learning to be human does not alter with the centuries. We must learn freedom, and learn to value it, by experiencing the lack of it. This isn't a programme for ordering politics on earth. It's much more serious than that. It's to teach us the freedom we shall need when we meet

God, and take part in our own judgment. God doesn't spend all this time on us here, training us and educating us in so many ways, in order to make us utterly passive when we finally meet him face to face. I am quite sure that we shall take part in our judgment! There is no room for doubt about what God wants for us. God has no process to go through, and that strange image of the archangel weighing us in a balance is surely not for God's benefit - he already *knows our resting and our rising, and discerns our purpose from afar.* No: all the training and all the choices we make here on earth are training us to take our most important step: the place of judgment will be the threshold of the house of God. Shall we look up, at that awesome moment, and see before us what we have longed for at every moment of our life? Or shall we turn away in dismay, and flee from the holiness of God with all our might and main? I think the words *acquired taste* take on a new meaning as I think of that moment. May we be, in whatever way we can be, sufficient for that time of crisis.

### How God Helps Us

One of the experiences by which God helps us towards our meeting with him is in clearing away from us some of the rubbish on which we tend to dwell. We get terribly upset when we can't work any more. Why, work was a curse on Adam outside the Garden of Eden; and we ache with misery when it's taken from us! We fix our mind on property, thinking that it symbolises a full life. When we no longer enjoy our food, and don't want to travel, and when (as Ecclesiastes says - there's most things in the Bible!) *waking, I long for the day; when it dawns, I say: how slowly evening comes!* These are tough things to bear. But in his mercy God detaches us from the earthly search for meaning, so that the simple, single meaning can appear in all its majesty: our meaning in his eyes. If we learn to read what is in the gaze of God towards us, we need have no fear to meet those eyes face to face. The falling of our earthly value is only making room for that simple truth to take its proper place in us. There is no doubting the utter sufficiency of the love of God towards us. Only we can stand in its way. We must learn to prepare for our judgment, like a bride preparing for her wedding.

*Fr Philip*