

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Before I Formed You I Knew You

For me, the title above is the most central of all reflections about my life. It carries in seven words the most awesome message I've heard about myself. I find it both a permanent consolation and a perennial challenge.

I Formed You

First, how long do I have to spell out to myself the meaning of that - *God formed me?* People go on for years with the sad impression that they are "a Friday-night car" - a botched job, a mistaken, accidental product of the fruit-machine of genetics. We spend significant resources on reinforcing this judgment, when we frown at one another, shake our heads at one another, and treat each other with mild contempt. To suggest that another human being has been wrongly put-together is not in keeping with our faith. God moves in a mysterious way, but he creates nothing in vain, and nothing that's incapable of becoming divine. We have little faith in this truth; some of us have not stopped apologising to God for being the people he himself created us to be (which might have exasperated God, if he were prone to exasperation). The truth is that we, *in all our variety*, have been judged indispensable for the Creation God wanted, and so we can say with peaceful assurance, *Lord, you have formed me.*

- On Purpose!

Furthermore, before he formed me, he knew what I would be like. God makes no shots in the dark, needs no test-bed for his creations. He knows us thoroughly, before we're a twinkle in our father's eye; and when he makes us, he is positively choosing all that we will be. What is it, I must wonder, that made God choose *me* to be in his world, in his plan? Sometimes people who have been very ill, and have recovered, tell me how sure they are that they have been spared for a purpose, that God has still something for them to do, some way in which they are to fulfil his plans. That belief is very fruitful, because it's nothing less than the truth. It gives human life its proper weight and dignity. We don't have to account for ourselves to any other human being. We're here because God made us and set us here; and anyone who has a problem with that must take it up with the proper Authority; but I wouldn't spend too

long questioning the wisdom of the decision. That's the difference between living in the accidental world of the atheist, and living in the Creation of the believer. It's a matter of intention. We believe that God did everything on purpose. Every human being we meet, therefore, is an act of God, and as such deserves our awed respect. More to the point, we have divine reasons for giving *ourselves* a bit of respect; and self-respect doesn't come cheap these days. But then, if God gives gifts, why would they be cheap?

Soak Up Some Of This

To get to grips with all that, I find it helps if we can give it some time to sink in. The damage inflicted by a Godless world is like a stroke or a coronary: instantaneous. People can be crushed, ignored, dismissed very easily, and the effects can be enormous; they can be sacked, evicted, excluded, fined, incarcerated (or just totalled, by the right sort of régime). The rebuilding of their self-respect is like recovery from disastrous illness: a long, slow process demanding time, rest, faith, hope and love. All of these come to those who find the grace to pray. I've come to believe that half of our problems with prayer stem from the ghastly images of God we were fed in our youth by frightened and ignorant people. How long it takes to free us from the punishing, tyrannical, cold, pitiless idols represented to us by various authorities who wanted to bully or scare us into "good" behaviour! No wonder we came out thinking we were "not worthy to raise our eyes to heaven" like the poor tax-collector. But if we believe that God loves us, we must teach people how nourishing and healing a thing it is to waste some time under his jubilant gaze. He *rejoices* in us. Is that hard to believe? But do you see what it means? Do you see how it changes everything, that the maker of the universe is delighted because of you? - and not for anything you've done or achieved, but simply because you are you? It's enough to challenge you to be yourself a little harder and more confidently than before! When I see a young couple in love, I'm seeing people who are becoming more themselves, because they are giving each other permission to. That's what "I love you" means. Well, when God says it, it means more: because he actually chose you to be you, and hopes you will accept the invitation!
Fr Philip