

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## A Terrible Beauty

Why is it that Lent, a time when I am hoping to change, should (honestly speaking) be so lonely and barren an experience to me? Why is fasting (if I do it accurately, hitting my real dependencies) so quickly reduce me to a pitiful feeling of abject poverty? Why is prayer the quickest way of remembering all the undone duties I should *really* be getting down to? Why should the giving of alms be such a minefield of motive versus self-regarding vanity? And why does the Lord's command that it should be done in secret, for a secret reward, make it so difficult for me? Am I really so vain that I live my life in the sight of others more than I do in the sight of God? If so, I'm in a poor state already, and in need of death and resurrection...oh. I see.

### Eleven Days In

After ten days of penance (Sundays being off limits) my Lent is already faltering. So Mother Church offers us a "spectacular" on this Second Sunday, reminding us what this narrow gate of penance is actually leading to: what *transfigured humanity* is really about. I think it's very important that we stick to the word *transfiguration*, just because it can't be mistaken for *makeover*. What we're aiming for in Lent is not a personality-fest, where we apply our long-cherished good ideas about ourselves and come up into the Spring fashions with a new figuah and a new hairdo. We are talking about a new humanity that shines so brightly that our ordinary eyes cannot bear to look upon it. The words of the Gospel say it: *they fell on their faces, overcome with fear*. There is something more to say: this holy splendour is not a pedestal-job, offering to turn us into a stained-glass window or a bright image; it is an overflowing blessedness, so that the Church today remembers God's promise to Abraham: *All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you*.

### Blessing The Earth

Obviously such beatitude can only be born in us at a tremendous cost. Abraham must give his whole life into God's hand: *leave your country, your family, your father's house* – that is to say, leave behind all you have been and all you have hoped for – *and set out in hope for the land I will show you* – that is, invest your life in the plan of God. If (as a Lenten excursion) you spent a little time

today reading the story of Abraham (Genesis 12 is where it begins) you would see how slow he is actually to trust, to grasp the scale of trust God wants from him. His life is the story of a man trying to wriggle his own way into blessedness, engineer his own destiny, accomplish his own fulfilment. Perhaps that is why he had to live to be 175, and only when he was 100 could God actually grant him the miraculous son he had promised!

### Twenty-Nine More

We have only 29 more Lenten days, and if we are to be laid open to the Paschal Mystery, we need to use our time: not only the penance, but the Sundays too. This shining of the transfigured Jesus must give us a sense of urgency, a feeling of the distance we have still to travel before the great death-to-life transition of Easter opens before us. The fact that these three disciples, who shroud their eyes before him on this mountain-top, were still capable of sleeping through his agony and deserting him in his passion must warn us; there is a way of letting the whole mystery unfold before *eyes that do not see, hearts that do not understand, and lives that are not changed and healed*. The beauty and joy of our relationship with God is either overwhelming, or it is a fake. But outside of Mills and Boon, the overwhelming experience that changes our life is nothing commonplace or cheap. The lighting-up of love, even between us mortals, requires investment of time, feeling, meditation, sympathy, sharing. When the invitation to give these things comes to us from God himself, we must be more generous than ever; the gift is so vast, the accession so awesome, that no common coin of affection or goodwill is sufficient for our response.

### Grace Abounding

Remember that the invitation we receive still comes from God, and is accompanied by a tide of grace to enable our response. To receive this we need to keep our eyes on Christ, shining in our world with unearthly light and holiness. When our minds are turned from earthly understanding of our lives, opened to the eternal, we can be made sharers in his beauty and glory. As long as we remain moored in the sad harbour of earthly trade and loss, our prospects will remain short of our longing. *Fr Philip*