

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Rejoice Greatly!

The Christian Church is a movement towards greatness, and this movement sweeps up everything the Church embraces, and qualifies everything the Church does. People outside the Church try to look at it as a human structure, and discuss its shape and its quality as if it were yet another institution to be weighed and commented-on; but those of us who are within know that it is quite other. For us, the Church has no dimensions, because dimensions represent finitude, and the Church's whole agenda is to evade limitation, to transcend what's finite, to access the eternal; rather than a house, it is a door; and the door leads *out*, not *in*.

Father, What Are You Talking About?

I am suggesting that everything that gets caught up into the Christian mystery is being blown apart in its limitedness, to make room, endless, infinite room; and that goes for every one of us. We have just the same earthbound tendency to interpret ourselves by earthly standards, measuring ourselves with the scales and rulers and rods of worldly understanding. But the truth is quite other. Only when the Church bursts the earthly frame can it proclaim its eternal message, and begin to resound with the divine voice. What does God say to his human creatures? He doesn't place us on pedestals and floodlight us. He calls on us to leave our past, to forsake our possessions, to abandon our preconceptions, to open our minds and hearts to the point where we are ready to lose them – *because that is what they are for*.

Above All, Joy

The quality that most needs detonating in us is our pitifully limited apprehension of joy. The best we can think of, the highest we can imagine, is far short of adequately suggesting what the joy of God is like and how we are to enter into it. The apostolic writers are quite sure of this, and don't allow the wretched business of analysis to kill the Gospel at source. ¹Peter speaks of *a joy so glorious that it cannot be described*; Paul talks of being given a mystical glimpse of Paradise, and of *hearing words said that cannot and may not be spoken by any human tongue*. This willingness to be silent about the divine mystery is essential to our faith; which is why we find the representation of heaven – even in the hands of Michelangelo Buonarrotti – is utterly unconvincing, a mere conventional

reference. We do not believe that the sight of God will look like what so gloriously adorns the western wall of the Sistine Chapel.

Sight For The Blind From Birth

The miracle in today's glorious Gospel is the gift of sight; but Jesus does not *restore* sight, as he does in the Synoptic Gospels for a man who prays, *Master, let me see again!* The man in today's story is born blind, has never been able to see, does not know what sight is. Our accession to the joy of God will be like this: the overwhelming transcendence of the darkness in which a man had learned to live. It is as if we have at this time only the thinnest idea of joy: when its divine reality bursts upon us, we shall have no words to speak, precisely because our words are all definitions, and there will then be no outer edge to our joy, no profile to follow, no delineation to set against its fullness. Our pain will be gone, blown away in the tidal boom of grace; and we will no longer have to pray that wistful prayer of the psalmist, *Give us joy to balance our affliction*.

The Futile Works Of Darkness

Part of the futility of our lives comes precisely from our living in the dark so completely. We measure our competence by the way we make our home in the dark, and we cultivate a sense of achievement if we become satisfied there. Forget the longing for the dawn; put aside the love of clarity and of the truth; live in the real – the dark – world, and make a virtue of its necessity. Then, under cover of its friendly secrecy, there is a choice of shortcuts and chamferings, elisions and dodges, which make life easier at little apparent cost. We know how easily a life of power can become infected with this "befriending the dark", and how people can come to grief when their misdeeds are made public. There is a haunting poem of Arnold that speaks of our living in a world that "hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; And we are here as on a darkling plain Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night." This world, we trust, has been touched with the grace of healing, and consecrated by Christ to the indomitable light in which it was made. Lord, let its joy be unconfined!

Fr Philip