

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Taste of Justice

“People these days are so brainwashed with dogma that they can’t use the sense they were born with.” I’m sure you will recognise the mode of thought, usually directed against those who have had some form of religious education. I think there’s truth in the remark, but it isn’t true of the religiously-educated, so much as it is of the people who have been *denied* a religious education (on the grounds that religion is a form of brainwashing).

Acquired Tastes

Some things we seem to come into the world equipped to enjoy; they don’t need to be sold to us. Most good things take a certain amount of education before we are ready to esteem them. Many children are unaware of the good effects of soap and water, for instance, until it is borne in on them that *an unwashed person has few friends*. (How one goes on from that salutary lesson to the fanatical obsession with cleanliness evinced by some adults is an interesting question.) Many other tastes can be acquired only with training and maturity: for instance, the love of spinach, the enjoyment of quiet, the appreciation of fine art. To come to understand these things, we need to have many *facts* drawn to our attention. Now, the received wisdom of our age is that there are no principles where taste is concerned, no facts which ground the statement that something is, or is not, good. There are no universal principles except one, which says that there are no universal principles. Well, I’m here to disagree.

In His Days Justice Shall Flourish

The Bible has this concept of *justice* which is as good a starting-point as any to search for principles. *Justice* means doing things properly; that means there is at least one right and one wrong way to act. In fact there are many shades of right and wrong; but at least we’ve got the concept that there are standards which apply. I am quite sure that these apply to such things as art and architecture, where especially people are wont to say “I know what I like” and leave it at that. Principles of proportion, between the various elements of a building, for example, speak to us of the judgment of the architect. If he has made the doors huge and grand, it may help people to behave with dignity; if he has made them small and insignificant, it may help people to feel small and insignificant. If the

rooms are ample, stately in width, height, and length, we’ll feel able to behave accordingly. If they’re mean and shapeless, we shall feel ill-at-ease and hurry through them, probably dropping litter as we do so.

Justice For Human Beings

means treating them as they deserve: with honour and respect. We have to know what sort of honour that might be. There have been many estimates, some from distinguished and eminent people, others from other sorts. Apartheid, the Holocaust, and various terrorist agendas have advanced ways of dealing with human beings which are widely repudiated; but on what grounds? Not, surely, just because *I wouldn’t like that to happen to me*; but because we have a positive, principled approach to human life which forbids its being exploited, dishonoured, damaged. Christians, like Jews, do not have to think out an estimate of the value of human life. For this we turn to the Creator, whose work of art we human beings are. For Christians, there is a further revelation of the value God has set on our lives: *he sent his Son to save us when we were still sinners*. The ultimate answer to the question of human justice is to be sought in this stupendous fact. What, then, are the limits to our thinking, when we attempt to treat one another justly, to value one another correctly? What honour is *not* due from one human being to another? Perhaps the Advent readings of this Sunday may make us aware that the world’s estimate is not to be trusted if it falls short of the message the Creator sends into the world, when *the Word became flesh, and dwelt in our midst*. That has raised the human roof to divine proportions.

Fr Philip