

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Truth Will Out

The Gospel has been talking to us lately about some very worrying things. Jesus has told the Twelve to go out and take on the world, with its disease, its death, its incurability and division, all its entrenched demons. Not an easy command! He has gone yet further, speaking of judgment following in their tracks; he has hinted darkly at scourgings, treachery, and being hauled before the courts. He has predicted betrayals by family and trusted friends; he even says that the apostles will be "hated by everyone". It's in this context that today's Gospel begins: "Do not be afraid!" - and of this we have, by this time, some need.

"Everything will be uncovered!"

I suspect older Catholics will not feel that this is very consoling. Anyone afflicted with a Catholic sense of sin will feel the tug of dread expressed in the thunderous periods of the *Dies Irae*, the sequence of the old Requiem Mass, so conscious of the awe of final judgment, the fine sifting of the self under the stern eye of God. I think this ancient hymn had a truth to tell, and that we should never *discard* an accepted element of the faith; but I find that particular hymn one of the clearest examples of a partly-told truth. It isolates the justice of God, in all its tremendous and fearful veracity, from his overwhelming and inexplicable love for sinful humanity. For some reason, although God is all-holy, he seems to have some strange kind of love for us, who are hardly holy at all. But we should be sure that in the language of love, we are much closer to the truth about God than in the language of justice. Have you ever thought that what is really frightening about judgment is not its *justice*, but the opposite? We are terrified of the court, not because it will find the truth, but *because we fear it might get the verdict wrong!* Now, the justice of God is unable to err, because it is a quality founded in his nature, and *God is Truth* as well as *Love*. So in the making plain of all things, we should find a joy that is strong, simple, and healing. We shall see the whole picture, and God's love for us will be known by us and by everyone. There is nothing here to make us afraid. We can't tell ourselves this too often. In his inexorable

appetite for truth, God always finds the balance lying in his eternal love - rather than in any subdivision of love, such as justice.

"Do not fear him who kills the body."

Here speaks the Lord of the Resurrection. He is not merely sabre-rattling in the face of the death which - in Gethsemane - will have him prostrated; he is telling us to replace our natural fear of death with that wholesome "fear of the Lord" which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We are not to fear God out of timidity, because he is the punisher or the executioner; he is the one who most loves us. We are to fear losing sight of him, and falling to the real death - which is to be without him. What a lover most fears is that he might do something to hurt or offend the one he loves. This feeling guides him to do what is best. That positive and wholehearted care is what must take the place in us of the world's tangled and haunted superstition, the fear that death will be our ending.

"There is no need to be afraid!"

Why do we not need to live in fear? Because we are so precious to God that every hair on our head has been counted. When you think of the debris that a single person sheds in the course of a lifetime - all the bits that have dropped off, all the nappies and broken toys and paper and pots and pans and old clothes and furniture and waste baskets and pedalbins and dustbins you've had carted away - you might be forgiven for thinking that you're the epicentre of a sort of ecological bonfire. That is the measure of the tenderness of God for us: *he counts every fallen hair*. He is truly the Saviour of all that we are, the Shepherd even of our lost life. This truth needs endlessly telling to us, until the powers of evil loosen their grip on us. We find it hard to hope, we are feeble lovers, we are readier to fear mindlessly than to trust. We think our joy is a temporary deception or an endangered species. We need to contradict that pious superstition, which assumes that God wants us to be devastated and helpless. All that we know about God says we are wrong. As Jesus said: I came that you may have life, and have it to the full. Fr Philip