

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Is There Alleluia In Australasia?

The poetry of Easter seems to me to be at home in the *Northern* Hemisphere. Given our miserable winter, I can see the point of having midsummer on Christmas Day (although it's perhaps in bad taste - like flying in fresh raspberries instead of Plum Pudding). But Easter in Autumn? *I think not*. It seems so important a part of our liturgy that the earth should be *resurrecting* while the Church proclaims Easter, that I should hardly know how to proceed if I were South of the Equator. How about the onset of dark nights as Pentecost draws near, or Corpus Christi at midwinter? Dear brethren, this is not a bad dream, but a way of life in much of Africa and South America, and the Pacific islands, and the whole of Australasia. No daffs in the font at Buenos Aries! Easter arrives there just as Seasonal Affective Disorder is setting in. How do they bear it???

When It Happened

However far away the Holy Land may feel, it's still in our half of the globe, and the features of the Church have been moulded in our continent. Here we are inheriting, and like all heirs we receive gifts we did nothing to deserve. We know, from the earliest and strongest traditions we have, that Jesus died at Passover. It's amazing how many different ways have been evolved for calculating the anniversary. For Passover itself the Jewish lunar calendar gives a precise dating (14th Nisan), but this was too simple for Christian calculation. In Asia Minor, when the Church was very young indeed, the first Christians used to celebrate Easter regularly on the Jewish Passover itself (not, therefore, always on Sunday). In Antioch they accepted the Jewish definition of the Paschal Moon. But in Alexandria (a very influential church) they put Easter after the Spring Equinox, and the Council of Nicaea agreed with them. But the Alexandrians calculated on a 19-year cycle created by St Anatolius. The Romans, who now as then think they know better than anyone else, were not satisfied with this, preferring an older 84-year cycle which gave even more different dates. Again, the Alexandrians didn't mind Easter falling on March 15th, but the Romans never went earlier than 16th, and never later than 21st April, whilst the Alexandrians went to 25th. Augustine remarks that in AD 387 Easter was observed on

21st March (in Gaul), on 18th April (in Italy) and 25th April (in Egypt). From the 5th century Rome surprisingly surrendered, and decided to follow Alexandrian methods of calculating Easter. In Britain until 669 they had a quite separate method of calculation; when times changed this didn't always favour family unity. In 651 Queen Eanfleda of Northumbria (Celtic method) was fasting on Palm Sunday *on the same day* that her husband King Oswy (Roman method) was celebrating Easter Sunday. So complex has the counting procedure become, that the Jewish Passover can now be four weeks or more adrift from the date of the Christian Easter festival. What a pickle!

What Matters

is that wonderful power of the liturgy to annihilate space and time, and to make present the power of what it celebrates. We should reflect on the double aspect of Easter: it reflects a series of earthly factors - the Passion Story is an earthly story, with real dates and places. But Easter takes us into heavenly realms, into the heart of the eternal God. What was revealed in the life of Jesus, on a series of days in the first century, exists for ever in the heart of God. As Jesus made the mystery of God present then, so the liturgy makes it present for us now. What was true then is true now. Our circumstances make the liturgy unique and unrepeatable: never again will the same Church celebrate the same Easter as we have this year. Some of us will do it gravely, some quietly, some with a great abundance of joy, some in the obedience of grief. There will be grand liturgies with hundreds of voices raised, and there will be a few gathered together, to seek the risen Lord in their midst. But by the grace of the liturgy, for all who share in this one bread and one cup, there will be the peace of the upper room, the darkness of the garden, the tumult of a trial, a condemned and crucified King, and, at last, a tomb from which a man has risen: and all of this will be contemplated in its true setting, in the heart of the Eternal Father. *Fr Philip*