

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

An Alternative Dearing Report

Most people go into reverse when they see a crowd. If I'm told that a resort is crowded, I go elsewhere. Town councils tremble to hear of the arrival of football-supporters or pop-concerts or great political demonstrations. If the city is packed with people, I put off the shopping. But the sight of a crowd moves Jesus to compassion, rather than dislike, or fear; and his first thought here seems to be about their *needs*.

Student Tuition Fees

How unlike the Dearing report Jesus is, after all. It's quite understandable. When I led University students off to a weekend retreat, perhaps in a group of fifty, I used to subsidise them, so as to make it less of a financial question for them. But to give forty students £5 off cost me £200, and only gave them a fiver (and only cost them a fiver if I couldn't). So I chose between the attitudes of the Dearing report on universities (charge all students their fees) and of Jesus (how can we feed them?). The disciples, especially I am sorry to say Philip, are Dearing-people. Two hundred denarii is a year's wages for a labourer; even that would only give them a small piece each. Philip is echoing Moses in the Exodus desert (Num 11:1-23) who pointed out that the wholesale slaughter of all the animals the people owned would still fall short of feeding them. John is being very clear: the impulse to *send the people away to look after themselves* is to be equated with faithlessness, the sort that set its face against the Exodus. Remember, when Jesus was tempted in the desert, it was against the backdrop of the Exodus; and it is with Deuteronomy (the book of the desert) that he replies to the tester. We might say that this is where the disciples are thinking like men, and Jesus is thinking like God. Who do we side with?

Feed The Hungry

Compassion has to be practical, and that means it has to engage the *whole* need of the one we want to help. Some people feel that they need to confine their attention to the *deserving* poor. For Jesus this isn't an option. *The deserving*, for God, are those who have need: he says: *Blessed are you poor*, not *you deserving poor*. If they have other needs - lack of moral strength, lack of respectability, lack of dignity, lack of faith, hope and love, what of it? *Feed them yourself* covers the whole spectrum; you

just have to take a more comprehensive view of need. The word *salvation* doesn't only refer to religious needs; Jesus knows that the first need of a large crowd is for plain simple food. He'll talk about what else they need when he's got them on an even keel physically. The disciples do not believe this is possible; but neither, perhaps, did Moses.

How Was It For You?

I am struck by the fact that, when I was a student, the whole tax-paying community paid the tuition fees of students; they matter to *us*, *we* invest in our young people - that's a strong communitarian principle. In the Dearing report, we heard that *they should pay for themselves*, which is a move backwards towards pure capitalism. Your education, it says, is your personal possession, like your car or your portfolio of shares. You must invest in it or forego it. That puts me in my little canoe, and it relegates even further back the status of the community. I love the way this is represented as "choice", that great hurrah-word for justifying evil. Is this progress, or declension? I'm tempted to ask: *Is this a Labour government that I see before me?* But that's a political question. I've got religious questions about the rôle of community in our lives, which are to do with the relationship between people's needs and the deeds of the community. Jesus seems to ask us to stop looking at people as crowds with fearful demands, and to begin to treat them as neighbours - people with needs that we must make our own. Leaving aside the prescriptions of the Dearing report, I am quite sure that we have to install Jesus' way of looking at people in the political frame. I was hoping that others felt the same. Politicians can do much more than they think to set the standards of society. We must aim higher. We must be such generous people, that we make others believe generosity is possible.

Fr Philip