

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

---

## When God Acquits

When we think deeply about God, we can learn a lot about ourselves. It helps if we have something to focus our thoughts on that is practical and historical. God does practical, historical things - like *becoming man*; so we can think about a deed of God in these terms, which will help us. Today the Church considers forgiveness, which is both an historical, practical deed, and a mystery of eternity.

**Many Layers** Sin is always partly a failure in faith. We choose wrong things because we lose faith in the goodness of God. We grab at something other than God - a wrong thing - instead of trusting him to see us right. So when we seek for forgiveness, we must first of all turn away from our short-cut solution. Then we can renew our faith in God. You can see that these are two different actions: I might turn away from one wrong idea (being a burglar) only to choose another (being a highwayman). There would be some changes - but *forgiveness* would not be one of them. Then, even when we have turned back to God our lives still bear the marks of lovelessness: God never stops loving us, even when we sin; but *we interrupt the effect of his love on us*. It is as if we suddenly lock ourselves away in a dark room and refuse to see our friends. We become pale, ill, lonely, withdrawn and infirm. The sun still shines outside, the air is fresh, and our friends still long to see us and share their lives with us. But until we break out of our isolation, these blessings are as if they were withdrawn from us. So it is with sin: we have stepped out of the ambience of the love of God, and we can no longer approach him with open hands and hearts. So we dwindle, peak and pine until we (first) turn from our bad ideas and (second) decide to come home.

## My Father Goes On Working

But these human movements do not happen entirely spontaneously. When we turn *from sin* God is already at work in us. We have a taste for goodness which is God's gift, and when it comes into play the gift of God is at work. Our longing for God, however clouded and inchoate, however choked with confusion it may be, is also a gift outpoured in us. We call this giving of gifts *grace*. Saint Thomas points out that "this grace is instantaneous, and takes no time"; God does not have to consider his attitudes, and his deeds are not gradual, but total. *We* can take infinite amounts of time in considering our act of consent. How differently God sees this process! For God, once we have decided to come back, reconciliation is instantaneous. This is wonderfully expressed in today's reading about David's sin. Nathan holds up a mirror to it, and David

clearly sees the horror of what he has done: he recoils from the evil, and acknowledges his need for God. The response is instant: *The Lord forgives your sin: you are not to die*.

## The Signs of Repentance

The marks of repentance are everywhere, if we read the world aright. You can look out on a world full of hard faces, bad reputations, and raucous stories. I wonder how Jesus of Nazareth would have reacted to the tabloid press of our day? I feel sure that we are being given a lesson in today's Gospel about their world-view. Here is a typically Lukan heroine - *a woman who has a bad name* - and she is equipped with her alabaster jar of ointment (surely a slightly lurid feature: does it not suggest ill-gotten gains?) She is in an exalted state of nervous disturbance: she appears, an uninvited - even an uninvitable - guest, weeping copiously behind streaming hair, and spraying expensive perfume: one does not feel she arrived having thought all this out in advance (she might at least have laid on a towel). The whole scene speaks of an almost compulsive spontaneity. Perhaps in this sense alone Jesus perceives a kind of moral collapse which perfectly meets the spontaneity of God's gift of grace. She has taken no forethought, she has prepared no speeches, she has not thought out a proposal. She has just fallen to pieces, and is pouring out her tears, and her ointment (and her hair) with her life.  
*Fr Philip*