

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Stand On The Heights!

On the island of Ischia, off Naples, there is a volcano, a spire of rock, from whose perfect cone you can look down hundreds of feet to the sea in every direction. I once climbed to the top with a man who couldn't bear heights (on his hands and knees). I'm grateful not to share his phobia, since I have always been transfixed with joy in high places. I recall the long, apprehensive journey up the wooded flanks of the Pratomagno, around whose forty-mile-long roots the Arno splashes south to Arezzo, then north to Florence. We crawled to and fro through the forests of Vallombrosa, where everything green has fled to sunnier spots, and the road is like a brown tunnel. When we emerged, the great valleys beneath were shrunken to gutters in a huge blue panorama of empty air, and countless peaks of Tuscany and Umbria marched away in each direction. How many anxious eyes had scanned these views, in the days when armies filled the history-books of Italy, I couldn't guess. On my day the blue light washed it with serenity, and the gold sun glittered like a benediction. Mountains are often visibly holy places.

The Voices of Prophets

Prophets are people who fly high, see far, and speak words that carry more meaning than anyone knows (more even, often, than they know themselves). Like the great experiences of your life and mine, they must be saved for later, preserved in memory until they have yielded their gifts to the future. The prophet Baruch calls on Jerusalem to climb to the high places, to turn her eyes to the east. It is a poor old woman who responds, wasted with grief and labour, robbed of her children by the exile, isolated from her hopes, exhausted in disappointment. But the joy of God is not to be tasted by the new-born, who are old enough only for milk. The solid food of today's scripture is for the faithful who know what defeat is like, the people who have passed through the valley of darkness. But the image is of a hope that exalts, a true sense of expectancy. Two people have to *keep promises*: the one who makes the promise, certainly: but also *the one to whom it is made*. The purpose of a promise is this: *to change the time between its making and its*

fulfilment into a time of hope. Advent, if any time, is such a hope-filled season; and we are the people who must embody its expectancy. The attitude of faithfulness is ours, because we trust in the promises we cherish. And that is what will get us out onto the path to the heights, with our faces turned to the east, where the dawn comes.

A Way For The Lord

We must refuse that strange modern hatred of road-building in order to feel for the scripture today. There's always, to my mind, something sentimental in the modern longing for there to be no roads. We have only reached where we have because there is a way, and we need a way to go further. To despise the road we are on is only appropriate for the prisoner in transit, not for a pilgrim on the holy road. The road of today's scripture is the road God uses to fulfil his promises. The prophetic voice tells us to build it high and grand, so that those who travel on it may see the greatness of God's salvation. The road-maker knows about raising the valley, and about breasting the ramparts of the hills. It is a conversion of the land to its people, a live symbol of communication and viability, a physical act of faith. John the Baptist read these words in Isaiah, and he knew that they were on the very verge of fulfilment, words for the present. May the Word be made flesh for us too!

Fr Philip