

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

This Is The End

I do not think there is a lot of mileage left in the notion of earthly monarchy; maybe we're just waiting for the tide to change, but really no-one seems to have very much time for the poor old royals ("*Put 'em on a pedestal, and we'll all throw eggs at 'em,*" as a clear-sighted person commented to me yesterday). The result is that the feast of Christ the King risks going down like a lead balloon - a relic of the days when the feast was first founded earlier this century, when they had just shot the Tsar, and Benito Mussolini was rising, and little Adolf was working his way up Germany, Kaiser Bill having gone off in shame, and the Bolsheviks were threatening the world. It's all a bit time-bound and passé. *Until we look at the Gospels chosen for the feast.* There we find, in year one, the Last Judgment, vindicating the poor and damning their oppressors; in year two, Jesus before Pilate being tried for his life, and saying *My Kingdom is not of this world*; and in year three, the crucified Jesus promising Paradise to the criminal who is sharing his death.

Today you will be with me In Paradise

Paradise is a very exotic word to have been spoken in the gloom at the top of Calvary. It means, my Biblical dictionary tells me, *the private hunting-grounds of a Persian prince*. It reeks of royalty, and of a mysterious location as far from the horrors of a Roman execution as could well be imagined. I note also that in Luke's Gospel this is the very last earthly conversation between Jesus and another human being: it is the image of Christ the King the Church is offering us this year. Now that seems to me to be far from old-fashioned. It seems to me that we should give it our most careful attention; I recognise in it the excitement that only Jesus seems to generate, flowing from his divine life which has entered the world we know. I've always felt that there are ways in which the presence of God contradicts many "accepted facts" about the world. Some people find this a cause for unbelief; *I have to live in the real world*, they say, *and here is a God who is contradicting it. I have to live amidst failure and depression, and God speaks of hope and joy. I have to accept suffering and God speaks of freedom and life. I live among a people of unclean lips*, said Isaiah, *and I am one of the worst; and my eyes have looked upon the Lord, the King.* This contradiction demands great power and authority to make any sense; to fly resolutely in the face of facts that speak of the sovereign power of sin, of death, of all evil, presupposes a power for good which is capable of eclipsing them all. Our faith in

God is assaulted every day by bad news, and we need to renew it every day.

Eternal Kingship

This royal authority over evil is "not of this world". Jesus says so to Pilate, who says: "You know I have power to release you, and power to crucify you." But Jesus is not interested in such earthly power. His readiness to be crucified - his amazing failure to argue for his release - shows that he is unafraid of its effects; in one sense he is even ready to go under, to die in earthly terms, in order to show that his hands are clean of earthly ambitions, even the ones accepted as laudable by the world. Jesus fed the hungry, welcomed the outcast, healed the sick: earthly works which attract praise. But even these aims were not worth the soiling of his hands with earthly power. It was after feeding the multitude that they tried to crown him, and he ran away from them. He is out to show that his kingship is completely the reverse of Pilate's power, a complete contradiction of it. He died wearing a crown, he died under the words *This Is The King Of The Jews*: a calculated insult to the Jews and their ambitions, which Pilate refused to withdraw. Nailed up in the finality of crucifixion, denuded of every shred of earthly dignity, effortlessly condemned by the great Empire that held the world in its hand, Jesus' life is the poorest, the weakest in the world: for all of us there is a moment when we are the youngest person in the world, and for each of us there is a moment when we are the next person to die. It is in this moment that Jesus contradicts everything weak that we can see in him with those awesome words to the criminal: *now you are with me as we die. This very same day you will be with me in Paradise.* When we have heard these words, and seen his earthly dereliction as he says them, we may be ready to understand the eternal nature of his Kingship, to see him as a new kind of ruler, whose authority over us stems very simply from the power to give us a life which is not of this world, which cannot meet the awful death which this world imposed on him. The more you think about that, the more you see that he had to go to that death, just so that he could make it a place of eternal hope for us.

Fr
Philip