

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Wisdom and the Tent

“The Word was made flesh. He *pitched his tent* amongst us.” I’ve never found a Bible translation that tried to render the word properly. *He dwelt amongst us* is what we’re usually offered, and that just isn’t good enough! We must remember the tent at this moment in the Gospel.

### The Import of the Tent

If you listen to the first reading on this Second Sunday of Christmastide, you will see that Wisdom (who is a lady) *has her tent in the heights*. The skies are referred to in the Bible as a tent: God spreads out the heavens like a tent, unrolling them like a cloth. But when the Psalmist asks: *Lord, who shall dwell in your tent, who shall ascend your holy mountain?* he isn’t thinking of the world at large, but a sacred space within the world. The central image of the tent is that which comes directly from the Exodus, when a special tent was set up *outside the camp*, in which Moses was privileged to speak with God in the name of the people. Within this Tent stood the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stones of the Commandments, and supporting the (empty) throne of God’s merciful love. This Tent stood beside David’s “House of Cedar” in Jerusalem, and came at last to rest at the heart of Solomon’s Temple. It is important to notice that it remains the “tent of meeting”: a sacred place in which God can be *encountered*. This preserved the spiritual freedom of God, not binding him to an existence in time and space like ours. Indeed, there is all the difference in the world between a solid *house*, with a garden round it, perhaps significant lands, and therefore a squad of security-men (in our day, electronic surveillance) to keep out hostile intruders: and a *tent*, transient and humble, ready at all times to be folded and carried away. It was this fragility that God chose, in which to depict his own coming to live in our midst.

### Amongst Us

So the Messiah’s coming is the arrival amongst us of this frail but powerfully-charged symbol - the tent of meeting. In his weakness and humility, he makes his own the tent’s fragility - a dwelling-place that is passible; the flesh of the Lord itself makes him *capable of the Passion*, able to suffer and die. For God to *dwelt with us* requires that he should thus make himself vulnerable, as we are: with this difference, that for us the ultimate

vulnerability is our propensity to sin. This territory of sin, Jesus enters only as a victim: *he carried our sins, he bore our iniquities for us*. In this way the Son of God, the divine Word, the Wisdom of the Most High, passes into the heart of our human life, and allows no distance to intervene between him and us. Now, after being far from God in our flesh, we find the body a place where we can be close to him.

### The Son Of Man Must Suffer

The absolute necessity of his going on to *suffer* is quite plain. That his divinity should shine brightest in the moment where he suffers is equally clear. God does not become human in order to dazzle our eyes with a splendour we can never attain, and then depart in a bright cloud, leaving us more darkened than ever. John truly calls the Cross his glory and exaltation, when he is lifted up to draw all people to himself. He comes to disclose a glory that endures to eternal life, not condemned by the transience and poverty of the flesh. So because of him, *my* flesh too becomes a tent of meeting; and if I fail to meet Jesus *in the flesh* I fail to meet him at all. Once we realize that, the natural world opens like a gate; in the body we become able to bless one another, and the world of the sacraments becomes possible, where a transient piece of bread, a simple cup of wine, *become* the Body and Blood which is the Word of God. He has come to us where we are, and the place is transformed in dignity; we can truly say God shares with us his glory.

### In Our Weakness, We Meet Him

It is an endearing fact about trainees for Holy Orders that they take so long to come to terms with this turning-point. It is so joyous to realise that our weaknesses have now become our entry into the Tent of Meeting, because it is where we meet the Lord of the Cross. No wonder it’s hard to believe; it took the first Christians centuries to believe it. Let us believe it today.  
*Fr Philip*

