

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

About My Father's Affairs

The biography of a great hero is often a somewhat self-centred story. This is perhaps because we see human life so much in terms of personal fulfilment, self-expression, “being your own person”; and never more so than in the culture of our own day. We're dangerously obsessed with selfhood, in isolation from our relationships and our belonging to community. We will sometimes give ourselves to community, but only if it seems beneficial to ourselves. What we find in the Baptism of the Lord is the start of a very different story. This has great consequences for our faith.

“Heroic Obedience”?

I don't suppose obedience recommends itself as an heroic quality. Heroes stand alone and fly in the face of opposition, facing down impossible odds with huge courage. Surely they don't knuckle under and “do what they're told”? Well, it is true that Jesus, at least in Mark's account of him, *is* left standing alone: *they all deserted him and ran away*. But from the beginning, Jesus, the greatest hero of the human family, is shown to us as an *obedient* son of his Father. This is worth some thought; I believe we may mistake the potential for heroism in our own situation, through the distortions our culture is suffering.

I come to do your will

In the Mediterranean religions which prevailed in the Roman Empire Jesus knew, perfection was represented by the figure of Apollo, god of the ideal. He is an excellent athlete, a talented musician, radiantly handsome and healthy. To follow Apollo is to cultivate the body, and to seek that harmony between the body and the mind which was so glibly adopted by the English public schools as a maxim for education: *a healthy mind in a healthy body*. The problem with worshipping Apollo is that we are in fact rather warty and gnarled instead of radiantly beautiful, and instead of being serenely noble in our minds, we turn out to be confused and agonized and deceived. I can't make myself beautiful to order (*pace* the promises of the Oil of Ulay). *Images* of perfection don't eliminate my actual imperfections; they may even make me feel rather worse. Supermodel photographs, heavily falsified, do this to real

young girls. And this may apply to spiritual failings as well as physical ones.

The heavens opened

Perfection is a word we sometimes use about Jesus, and while I've often heard the complaint that his holy Mother represents an impossible ideal of sanctity, which the Church has used to persecute real flesh-and-blood women who can never match up to it, I don't hear many people saying that the perfection of Jesus is a stick with which to beat people. Maybe it's worth recalling a line from Hebrews: *Although he was Son, he learned obedience through his sufferings: being made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him*. Notice that the scripture speaks of Jesus being *made perfect* by suffering. This must refer to the process required by his earthly nature. He had to grow in his physical stature, and learn to discern in his mental development, so of course his human spirit had its own work of maturing to accomplish. We recognise that his holiness is *developed* in a growing and changing experience that is exactly like ours, except that he did not sin. We should understand the life of Mary in the same way, and use the understanding so gained to measure our own lives and their meaning. What we see as a stumbling and clumsy journey through a sludgy landscape of fogs and glimpses may be this process of growth and change which unfolds in us the life of the children of God. Seldom understood, often unacknowledged or even dishonoured, we still struggle to live in obedience to the Father of lights. As a priest I know this struggle, and I've seen the price people pay to engage in it. They bear one another's burdens uncomplainingly, they patiently make room for one another's foibles and follies. They share depression and lack of vision, repaying these heavy presents with encouragement and hope. It's a quiet fight, but I believe it deserves to be called heroic. *Fr Philip*