

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## A Prophet Rejected

In Jesus' failure at Nazareth there's something especially fateful. Surely here he might have expected acceptance; indeed he speaks words which astonish the audience by their graciousness. But the positive reception rapidly erodes: instead there is a disaster, and Jesus' response only makes it worse. Something very ugly begins to motivate the audience, who turn swiftly into a kind of lynch-mob. The word of God has found rejection, and the Cross is clearly unveiled right at the beginning of the story.

### For the time being...

...the heat is turned off, and we remember the sinister ending of Luke's story of the temptations in the desert, that the Devil left him, *to return at the appointed time*. The teeth of the opposition have not been drawn, it is only a postponement of the contest. Luke is alone among the Gospel writers in displaying so dramatic a portent of the future at the very beginning of the story. But the life of Jesus is full of such foreshadowings. The words of Luke's Simeon at the Temple make clear that his life will be tempestuous and critical for the fate of his people, *destined to be a sign that is rejected*. John gives us the warning that *He came to the world he had made, and the world did not know him: he came to his own people, and they would not have him*. Clearly the rejection that awaits Jesus at his trial is not a mere accident, that one day certain forces came together, and a man perished; it is not a case of the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jesus does not stop a passing bullet. The fate in store for him is the most necessary, the most exactly certain of all realities; he is as certain to die on the Cross as the world is certain to crucify him. We find this hard to cope with, and start thinking about predestination, and all the inhuman themes that so messed up the minds of Swiss Protestants during the Reformation. There are big mistakes to be made in this minefield. Rather than talking about Fate, perhaps we can consider Jesus as a figure who embodies God's providence.

### A Providential Man

"Providence" means "the quality of seeing ahead". We all use a measure of providence, - trying to foresee the consequences of our actions and those of others, planning for the future as carefully as we can. But this does not really resemble the total

quality of God's providence, which not only knows everything that is going to happen, but *determines* the final outcome of everything. This is where some Swiss Protestants suddenly reduced their thinking to human scale: they assumed that, if God had determined the end result of Creation, there was very little room left for free will on the part of the creatures; which seems to me to be a recipe for despair and moral abandonment. I would rather remember the astonishing way in which God seems effortlessly to turn our worst messes into the birthplace of goodness. We do not only believe that because of theological teaching: we know it in our experience, we discover it day by day.

### When The Worst Happens

The worst outcome we can imagine occasionally comes to pass. It's devastating; and then in our disastrously changed life we slowly discern the consequent coming to birth of qualities and strengths we would never have needed if our own plans had been tidily made good. Then we have to be careful in our efforts to understand. You can never wish evil - on others, or for yourself. However, the simple truth is that when it happens, a perspective opens up which is the providence, the generous pro-vision of God, who is the eternal healer, redeemer, and saviour of our blinded world. His word is the last word, and it is never less than glorious.

*Fr Philip*