

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

In A Monastery

When you read this I hope I will be in a large church with about a hundred people, forty-odd of them students, the rest monks. If it is Saturday evening, we shall be singing Vespers, and if it is Sunday morning, we shall be celebrating the Mass. Outside will be the Vale of York to the south, and the dales to the west, and the Hambleton hills to the north and east. There will be a great atmosphere of prayer and attentiveness.

Saul's Spear

I always think, when we read the story of David stealing the spear of Saul who is murderously hunting him down, of the day of their first meeting. Then it was Saul who was skulking in the trenches, gloomily listening to the boasts and taunts of Goliath. The young David appears to bring his brothers a Red-Cross parcel from home. He is indignant at the enemy's tone, and the inactivity of our lot. So cynical Saul orders him to be dressed in the royal armour (we can recall this story when, as Son of David, Jesus wears a crown of thorns). David is furiously embarrassed but, with, I think, great dignity he says, his voice coming sepulchrally through a helmet visor: "Take these off, I cannot go in these." Then, he fought his king's enemy with stone and sling; now he once more holds a royal weapon he has no intention of wielding against his persecutor.

Love Your Enemies

It is no use listening to the Gospel without recognising the strength we will need to do what it says. It's telling us today to lay down the weaponry of hatred or revenge, to break the circle of violence. There are heroic people who can follow this literally, like that little figure who stood before the tank in Tianenmen Square, and whom, nameless, we will always remember for it, or like the heroes in Nazi Germany who would not let themselves be part of the horror, even at the apparently ineffectual cost of their lives. What about us? We can try to be peaceable, swallow a little anger here, advocate the cause of peace there, and so on. But the Gospel is about *conversion*; it isn't a code of good manners or a manual of kind advice or man management. When we hear things which rattle our windows - and *love your enemies* must be one of them - we know we are in the

environs of the Cross. *Father, forgive* is not an impossible ideal until we choose to make it so. The words were uttered by a crucified human being, not an angel, and one who had a strong sense of justice too.

Compassionate As He Is

I listened the other day to yet another discussion about capital punishment. They were there, the loud relatives of slaughtered children and of wrongly-convicted dead men, hurling their griefs and injustices at one another like weaponry. That's what we mustn't do. The task of a hurt human being is to be like Christ, quiet, unafraid, *not* obedient to the violent, but obedient to the compassionate God who has our life in his hand. When others rob and maim, we are to be redemptive. We have been given a share in his passion. He has called us to his side, in the same world where he carried the Cross, knowing the power of sin and of love, carrying them both safely to their end. That is why some of us are in a monastery, with people who have left everything to copy Christ, and why we will all set out into Lent once more, putting aside our worldly weapons in favour of fasting, and prayer, and selflessness. It may seem a hard beginning this year. But try to take courage! Indeed, it is a humble, but royal road that leads to life.
Fr Philip