

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

A Great Gulf Has Been Fixed

People who are not British comment on the class-system in our country. They say it is still powerful, and that we who live in it are largely unaware of it. It is hard to rejoice about this, or to take comfort in the accompanying remark, "But most people are middle-class". It's perfectly true that we have definite strata in our society, layers where we feel "at home", comfortable, and layers where we do not. Not all cultures are like this. There came a specific moment in Italian civilisation, for instance, when rich nobles suddenly went private. The Renaissance Princes were not always private. If you examine the palace-life of Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, that wily heir of the Medici, you will find that the unofficial prince of Florence lived in splendid simplicity on the first floor, whilst endless numbers of relatives - of every social position - found places to live in his house; in the back garden was a colony of working artists and sculptors, and the great doors of the palace stood open to visitors and suppliants of every grade. Great guests - Emperors, Patriarchs and Popes - were fed at banquets held in the courtyard, open to the street, and the population came to watch, and to wander through the corridors of power. Then the class-system cut in. Two generations later, such palaces were practically fortified, and filled with private soldiery. Of course, this led to class-hatred, starvation, venal patronage, party strife, and at (very) long last, the downfall of the nobility in a shower of blood and decaying masonry.

Where were you in 1792, Daddy?

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, carolled the unlikely voice of Wordsworth about the days when the guillotine was removing the heads of aristocrats in Paris. We English, of course, never developed the theme of 1649, when we took the head off Charles I; some say we had no need for a Revolution after that, since the warning was usually enough to curb the excesses of future kings of England; but the nobility and the very rich are still with us, and our foreign visitors just think we're happy to be class-ridden. What does the Gospel say about these things? Opinions vary. There is plenty in the Gospels which proclaims the equality of all who are human, in the eyes of God; and Paul is quite sure that God does not have favourites among races, and is no respecter of persons. I don't think he would conclude that we shouldn't respect rank, however, and the letter of Peter enjoins us to "fear God and honour the Emperor". I think the most revealing meeting between the powers of God and of the earth is that of Jesus with Pontius Pilate. Jesus does not fight against

his power, but nor does he quail before it. He owns that Pilate's power over him is "given from above", not for Pilate's benefit, but for the due accomplishment of God's will, of which Pilate knows nothing. Apart from this, Jesus shows himself willing to help and associate with anyone, high or low: scribes and Pharisees, beggars and cripples, the deranged, public sinners and centurions; he is indifferent to rank, and happy to ignore it.

Caught Red-Handed

Where there is class conflict Jesus is on the side of the poor. In the story of the (unnamed) rich man and Lazarus there is no conflict because of the great wall which keeps the rich man safe. The pitiful condition of Lazarus is no concern of the rich man, and this is where he fails. There is no suggestion that he built his wall out of particular malice, or that he plotted to engineer the death, or poverty, of Lazarus. He takes no account of the little drama outside his gates. But he still burns in Hell because of it. There is real evil in class. Quietly, inoffensively, it soundproofs the rich from hearing the cries of the poor. The more respectable the barrier, the more effectively it prevents the work of justice. But when our century is weighed before God, it won't just be the acknowledged "rich" who will tremble. The "great gulfs" which let Lazarus starve in our day are ones in which *all of us* are implicated: our trade barriers, our banking systems, our privileged position in this world where millions starve. It isn't much use to pretend that we don't know this; and if you really haven't cottoned onto it, I'm telling you in this Bulletin: You are enjoying luxury at the expense of your dying brothers and sisters on the far side of the wall. *Now* we've got every legal right to hold on to what is ours; so much the worse for us, when we stand before God, who is the Father of the poor. Our control of our own destiny means that we are still free to make a difference, to redress the balance, to reduce injustice. This robs us of any excuse for not altering the outlook for the starving. The rich man wasn't especially evil; but he goes to hell. Once again it is Luke who so cleverly inserts his scalpel into the cavities of our assumptions. Listen to him!
Fr Philip