

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Unjust Judge

Louis de Bernières pointed out this week that there is something “morally repugnant” about the figure of God in the book of Job. I think he is right: the book of Job is a human literary work, which is not, in the place in point, trying to depict God; Job ends in the spirit of the first of the Commandments, saying that a human depiction of God is impossible.

### What If God is Unjust?

Not every religion thinks this possibility is a nightmare. Many religions have *assumed* that their gods were capable of injustice, cruelty, and moral depravity: the “abominations” - the gods the Canaanites worshipped before the Holy Land became Holy - continued to be a religious problem for centuries of Hebrew life. The gods of Rome too were a very unreliable lot, often more motivated by divine hanky-panky than by divine justice. Primitive animal sacrifices were often offered in the firm conviction that the gods were bloodthirsty, and also easy to distract with a helping of good red meat. By comparison, the God of Abraham is throned in an austere and superhuman justice - easy for humans to misunderstand, inscrutable to our minds - but always finally revealed as the very fountain of righteousness.

### Getting Faith Right

I'm sure that all religious leaders - from Moses down to a humble modern PP - would agree that it is hard to keep religion right. People are still prepared to believe quite awful things about God. *And what people believe matters*. It changes the way they live. If you believe, however unconsciously and dimly, that God is capable of creating you a monster, leading you into disaster, handing you over to a lifetime of punishment, and then deserting you for all eternity, it makes a difference to the way you live! Conversely, if you believe that God creates out of wisdom, sustains you out of fidelity, and brings you to fulfilment out of love, then that makes a huge difference too. Jesus makes this point several times: *If you, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?* Today he draws us the picture of a ghastly unjust judge, and says, in effect, “Do you think God is like that?” Insofar as we fail to pray to him, and allow ourselves to become negative, cynical, and despairing, you would really think that this *was* the portrait of God we had enthroned. We should ask ourselves what the real God is like, and then take a good hard look at the lives with which we worship him. Could people read, in our peacefulness, the kindness of our Creator? Or

in our trustfulness, the fidelity of our God? Or in our confidence, the power of our God to bring all his promises to fulfilment? I've often written and said that for a Christian *there can be no tragedies*. Our life is an epic, a saga with a divine ending. We must live, not as fearful and betrayed people under sentence, but as liberated and joyous people whose natural disposition is hope. *God is good!*

### The Work Of Hope Is Prayer

Expectancy - hope in the future - must bear fruit in the present. For this we need to pray constantly, putting aside the works of despair which are self-centred and finally a dead end. Prayer lifts the heart and mind out of the human perspective and into the boundlessness of the mind of God. Liberation! By comparison, our inspirations are pokey and breathless prisons; the greatness of the Spirit of God is of a different order. Our urge to define God, to second-guess, predict, or control him, is always going to restrict the real God, and that is to make him an idol, a man-made servant of human ideas. Only someone who secretly suspects God is malicious could think this an improvement. For the Church, the whole point about God is that he is precisely greater than we are. So for the author of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* to notice that a human portrait of God is highly inadequate, is absolutely orthodox. If God were on the scale which human authors could *depict* - even those as great as Monsieur De Bernières - you and I might like him; but we would surely not be able to worship him.

*Fr Philip*